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History in the Gutters: A Critical Examination of Chester Brown's *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*

by

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Abstract

In Chester Brown's *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, the enigmatic nineteenth-century Métis leader is represented in ways that negotiate the binary-challenging nature of his historical persona. The concepts of hybridity and image-text are vital to my reading of the book, which I designate as a "bio-graphic narrative": a hybrid form of biography and graphic (comics) narrative.

My analysis traces *Louis Riel*'s treatment of its unsettling subject with a concentration on the image-textual operations of the bio-graphic narrative. In particular, a postcolonial critique of the graphic text's symbolic implications is undertaken. The context of this critique is the situating of Riel, the Métis people, and their conflicts with the Canadian government in the doubly-inscribed space of the settler-colony. This study posits Brown's bio-graphic narrative as a locus of negotiation between binaristic assumptions, where history flows through the hybrid spaces between the comic panels ("the gutters") in a condition of productive possibility.

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Introduction: "A Place Where History Might Slip through the Cracks"

In the late nineteenth century in what is now the Canadian West, a man named Louis Riel led his people, the Métis (descendants of colonial-era unions between European fur traders and Native women), in two conflicts against the government of the fledgling Dominion of Canada. After the defeat of Riel's forces at Batoche, he was captured by the Canadian side, tried and convicted for treason, and finally executed in November 1885 (Bumsted, *Louis Riel* 316). In the one-hundred-and-twenty-plus years since his death, Riel has been the subject of numerous texts, both fiction and non-fiction: history books, biographies, novels, plays, films, songs, poems, comics and sculptures. He has been represented in almost innumerable ways, by many authorial voices, for a great variety of ends, to such an extent that the man himself might not even recognize the versions of himself that lives on through these works.

Riel has become a historical figure whose cultural prominence now dwarfs the smaller, more local focus of his political endeavours in his own lifetime; he is, for all intents and purposes, an icon. Yet his iconic stature is not based on a united, dominant set of characteristics; his life and his achievements are irreducible to simplicities, to anecdotes of integrity and leadership like George Washington's or to words of determination and resolve like Winston Churchill's. As a cultural icon, his representation is characterized not by simplicity but by multiplicity, by *hybridity*. This last term is a vital one in conceptualizing the representations of Riel, for it is often employed in postcolonial criticism of colonial societies, and a critical understanding of the operations

of hybridity in the colonial space is, to my view, a useful entry point to thinking about the representations of Riel.

Hybridity and the Settler Colony

The concept of hybridity possesses fertile possibilities for productive significations; Homi K. Bhabha goes so far as to call it "the sign of the productivity of colonial power" (159). Bhabha, the most prominent proponent of teasing out hybridity through postcolonial analysis, writes further that it "represents that ambivalent 'turn' of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority" (162). At the symbolic heart of hybridity, then, is an ambivalent unsettling (and "un-settling") of colonial authority, its tenets, its assumptions and its narratives. More succinctly, it is a disruption of the processes of colonial power and the inherently binaristic premise of the colonial relationship: hybridity "unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (159-160).

It is critical at this juncture to recognize the complexity of hybridity, to see it as neither "the noisy command of colonialist authority" nor "the silent repression of native traditions" (Bhabha 160) but as a problematic, ambivalent negotiation among all of the myriad sites of power in the colonial milieu. While hybridity is not synonymous with resistance to colonialism, it is also not wholly inseparable from colonial domination; in

fact, it constitutes the "double inscription" of both of these polarities, destabilizing their authority by reaffirming it. Hybrid texts are "mixed and split" (162), doubled, contradictory, malleable, elusive. They are, to Bhabha's mind and to my argument, the ineluctable product of colonial power relations; the colonial signifier, writes Bhabha, is "neither one nor other [...] an act of ambivalent signification, literally splitting the difference between the binary oppositions or polarities through which we think cultural difference" (182). Hybridity is thus an alternative to the polarized Self/Other, Occident/Orient, Colonizer/Colonized conceptions of the colonial relationship that have predetermined much of post-colonial discourse, and yet, vitally, it is predicated on a recognition of the utterance of those polarities and of their power effects in the colonial setting. In Bhabha's words, "hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects" (159); therein lies the reimplication of identifications in strategies of subversion mentioned above.

That said, hybridity is no theoretical "magic bullet" that resolves all ambiguities; it is merely the ambivalent articulation of those ambiguities. According to Bhabha,

> Hybridity has no such perspective of depth or truth to provide: it is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures [...] in a dialectical play of "recognition". The displacement from symbol to sign creates a crisis for any concept of authority based on a system of recognition: colonial specularity, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid. (162)

In summary (if indeed such a multifaceted concept can be reduced to such terms), hybridity is a condition produced by and through the assertion of colonial power, re-presenting the binaristic terms of that power and, in doing so, subverting it and breaking those terms down. The hybrid, then, simultaneously occupies a liminal space between the positions of the colonizer and the colonized while casting the firmness of those positions into doubt, interrupting the assumed dialectic.

The hybrid, or its real location in colonial space, might also be called a heterotopia, which Michel Foucault defines as a place "outside of all places" that is nonetheless in relation to other, more stable locations "but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" ("Of Other Spaces" 24). Foucault's term will be a useful one to utilize in association with hybridity, since Bhabha's conception of it is predominantly discursive or textual, while heterotopias are, by definition, geographical realities (the examples Foucault provides include rest homes, prisons and cemeteries [25]). Therefore, whether as manifested in a hybrid text or in a heterotopic space, the role of hybridity in colonial discourse is similar to what Bhabha claims as the role of theory in wider intellectual discourse, namely "the *negotiation* of contradictory and antagonistic instances that open up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle, and destroy [...] negative polarities" (37). The idea of the hybrid space as a location of negotiation is central to Bhabha's thinking about colonial relations, and it is also central to the rubric of settler-invader postcolonialism, a related concept to which I will turn to next.

To begin with, it would seem necessary to establish the critical prerogatives of

settler-invader post-coloniality and compare them to the concept of hybridity as Bhabha lays it out. From the onset, it is important to contextualize this particular methodology, for its field of applicability is culturally and historically precise. Settler-invader post-coloniality is grounded in the concept of the settler colony and criticism along its theoretical axes must be focused on textual discourses of the culture of the settler colony. In their essay "Settler Colonies," Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson define their titular locations as follows:

> In general, historical definitions of "settler colonies" have relied on the presence of long-term, majority white racial communities, where indigenous peoples have been outnumbered and removed by colonial policies and practices. Thus countries like Australia, *Canada*, and New Zealand have traditionally been described as "settler colonies," although it is also possible to make more complex arguments about the inclusion of nations such as the US or South Africa, for example. (361; emphasis added)

In the scope of this work's consideration of Riel, therefore, Canada's emplacement in this theoretically-charged category is critical. Furthermore, in the interest of positioning settler colonies in relation to the conceptions of the First World of imperium and the Third World of colonized native cultures so firmly theorized in the post-colonial sphere, the term "Second World" is often implied, as both a noun and an adjective. Lawson, usually credited in critical discourse as the originator of the term, states that "the address of the settler is towards both the absent(ee) cultural authority of the imperium and the

effaced, recessive cultural authority of the Indigene" (159). The term "Second World," therefore, aptly expresses the liminal, inter-colonial positioning of settler cultures; to both the First and Third Worlds, "the settlers are secondary" (Johnston and Lawson 370).

The terminology is not without its slippages and problematic politics, however. Johnston and Lawson further emphasize that "in some ways the term 'settler colonies' covered up the real politics of these cultures" (362), that its prevalence represents a wider strategy by the settler culture to "refer mainly to the very obvious majority white populations without taking account of the physical violence and representational erasure done to indigenous communities in order to achieve that 'whiteness'" (362). It is in response to this disavowal of the processes of physical and representational displacement on the part of settler cultures that the term "settler-invader" has come into usage in critical circles, and though I will employ the simpler term "settler" in reference to the colonies, cultures and subjects in question (as Johnston and Lawson do in their essay), I will repeat their reminder that "the 'invader' rider should always be kept in mind, as it is in the theory" (362).

Despite this terminological accentuation of the colonial project and the inescapable complicity of the settler culture in that project and its effects (immediate and delayed), settler colonies such as Canada nonetheless inhabit an essentially "postimperial" space, as Lawson puts it (152). The crucial discourses of the imperium remain imprinted on the settler subject's cultural identity, although any direct colonial ties with the imperial centre have been severed or else have disintegrated over more than a century of gradual political and cultural detachment (in many cases, including

Canada's, vestiges of these connections continue to linger). This "postimperial" state often proceeded from an acute sense of cultural alienation felt by the settlers, "the feeling of being colonized" themselves; thus, "the settler is both colonized and colonizing" (Johnston and Lawson 363). This is the crux of "the doubly inscribed space of colonial representation" which Bhabha articulates, but an exploration of its many differential aspects should further demonstrate the proximity of settler-invader post-coloniality to the colonial hybrid space described by Bhabha.

First, it is "crucial," as Johnston and Lawson put it, to think of the settler as "occupying a place caught between two First Worlds, two origins of authority and authenticity" (370). On one hand is Europe, the imperium, "the source of its principal cultural authority"; on the other is the indigenous culture of the First Nations, "whose authority [the settler subjects] not only replaced and effaced but also desired" (370). The model settler "represents, but also mimics" the original imperial culture, but also "mimics, appropriates, and desires" the authenticity of the indigene; mimicry is thus "a necessary and unavoidable part of the repertoire of the settler" (369). Through the repetition and mimicry – that which is "almost the same, *but not quite*" (Bhabha 123) – of commonly recognized markers of imperial culture, the settler subjects express their desire for the innate symbolic authenticity of the imperial centre from which they are disconnected. An illustrative example of the effects of this imperial mimicry in the Canadian context can be observed in the country's retention of the British monarch as head of state.

Concurrently, the settler tends to be invested in addressing the authenticity of the

indigenous culture, or more accurately, in appropriating it. On this point, Johnston and Lawson inform us that "the typical settler narrative, then, has a doubled goal. It is concerned to act out the suppression or effacement of the indigene; it is also concerned to perform the concomitant indigenization of the settler" (369). It is important to grasp that while the former concern was historically manifested in a physical sense, the latter concern is worked out exclusively in a symbolic sense: "the management of the displacement of indigenous peoples moves from the physical domain (where it has been incomplete) to the symbolic domain" (365), where its project can (at least theoretically) be completed. Central to the settler's construction of an indigenized authority is an identificatory connection to the land, a sense of belonging to and being grounded in the post-colonial space. It is in this way that the settler subject desires the native subject: the colonist's envy of the indigene's symbolic authenticity via the latter's inherent claim to the land. The physical and symbolic possession of land (and spatiality in general) is therefore vital to the settler identity, to the creative process of becoming-native; "the important work of discourse and textuality" (362) in this process is to provide narratives and significations which affirm the settler's claim on the land, on the space of authenticity, be it through the appropriation of indigenous tropes or through their displacement by tropes of labour and/or progress (ie. "opening up the land").

Taking into account the various qualities and emplacements of the settler, positioned between the empire and the indigene, supplementary to both, mimicking the authority of the former and appropriating the authenticity of the latter, it should be clear that "the settler [is] also the 'go-between' for the European First World with that which it

has strategically named the Third" (370). Therefore, the settler position is one of mediation, "a place of negotiation" (370). The Second World "reading position," as Stephen Slemon calls it, inhabits "the space of dynamic *relation* between those [...] binaries which colonialism 'settles' upon a landscape" (38); Johnston and Lawson reaffirm that "colonialism is a relation, an unequal one, but no less a relation for that" (370). It is no great stretch to align the doubly inscribed position of settler-invader postcolonialism with the doubly inscribed hybrid position of Bhabha's postcolonialism, as they are both predicated on "the *negotiation* of contradictory and antagonistic instances," both invested in deconstructing "negative polarities" in the same (post)colonial space. As pertinent a position-taking as this aligning may appear to be, it would be a contentious one to the majority of postcolonialists; hence, a brief discussion of the epistemological debate around the Second World concept is perhaps necessary to defend my assumption of this critical/theoretical position.

Settler-invader postcolonialism is a relatively small critical school, dwarfed and marginalized (sometimes inadvertently, often willfully) by the dominant schools of postcolonial thought, of which Bhabha is a standard-bearer. In his position-taking essay "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World," Slemon contends that "the Second World of writing within the ambit of colonialism is in danger of disappearing," a danger he traces to its unsuitability to the limited (and limiting) parameters of the postcolonial field. Settler-invader postcolonialism "is not sufficiently pure in its anti-colonialism, because it does not offer up an experiential grounding in a common 'Third World' aesthetics, because its modalities of *post*-coloniality are too

ambivalent, too occasional and uncommon, for inclusion within the field" (35). Slemon traces these supposed impurities and ambiguities in Second-World writing to First-World postcolonial criticism's privileging of the resistance of Third-World texts to colonial power, but therein locates an inherent contradiction.

Literary resistance, Slemon argues (with support from critical work by Jenny Sharpe and Timothy Brennan, among others), "is necessarily in a place of ambivalence: between systems, between discursive worlds, implicit and complicit in both of them" (37). Even the most virulently anti-colonial text, if it is produced by a Third-World writer in the imperial *lingua franca* and/or discursive tradition, is "*necessarily* complicit in the apparatus it seeks to transgress" (37). The postcolonial critical apparatus does not differ much on this point; it has in fact argued vehemently in agreement with it. Bhabha's hybridity, predicated on "an act of ambivalent signification," is its very state of being. The main point contested by Slemon in "Unsettling the Empire," then, is that the "same theory which argues persuasively for the necessary *ambivalence* of post-colonial literary resistance," despite its compulsion to conflate the Second-World critical position with that of the First World, "is in fact nothing less than an argument *for* the emplacement of 'Second World' literary texts within the field of the 'post-colonial'" (37). This contention establishes precisely the initial premises from which I wish to proceed: that settler states are synonymous with the hybrid colonial space described by Bhabha, and that the texts and discourses of the settler, like hybrid texts, are "mixed and split," negotiating the rough, ambivalent waters of colonial relations while simultaneously questioning the theoretical *terra firma* of the Colonizer/Colonized

binarism.

Imagetext and the Bio-Graphic Narrative

It now behooves me to ask: what do these "hybrid texts" look like? Is any settler text automatically a hybrid? Does simply arising out of a Second-World settler colony context encode a text with the myriad anxieties and emplacements rooted in the unique experience of the colonial project possessed by the settler, or does textual hybridity demand a measure of creative agency as well? Are some texts *more* hybrid than others? These questions, while pertinent, are likely fodder for a whole other discussion entirely, but do lead to the fulcrum point of my introductory arguments. It would seem to me that the most effective and challenging of hybrid texts would be those that embody Bhabha's hybridity not merely in the discursive realm of society, culture, politics, and history, but also in the formalistic realm of language, expression, representation, and signification. Not merely hybridized in *content*, but hybridized in *form*. A genuine hybrid text would therefore not merely act out the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity, as Bhabha has set down, but unsettle the formal assumptions of artistic discourse (as far as those assumptions are always already *imperial* constructions) as well. Texts of this kind might include experimental written fiction, photography, film, and, most crucially for the purposes of this study, comics.

Though its inclusion in this class of textual forms may initially strike one as controversial, the comic book is predicated on the very sort of disjunction in representation that characterizes the hybrid; it possesses a type of formalistic hybridity.

Just as Bhabha and the settler-invader postcolonialists turn their focus to the liminal, binary-interpellating nature of the hybrid/settler text, the graphic text's focus is the elemental (dis)connection between words and images. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, comics critic (and artist) Scott McCloud notes this simultaneous linkage and disjunction between image and text: "most American comics [...] have long emphasized the differences between words and pictures. Writing and drawing are seen as separate disciplines [...] and 'good' comics as those in which the combination of these very different forms of expression is thought to be harmonious" (47:4-6)[1]. Thus, comics have a tendency to emphasize the dissonance of images and text while simultaneously striving for the harmony of the two, a function shared by the colonial hybrid space, which interpellates and destabilizes binaristic classifications by pushing them into "unsettling" combinations.

This combination of image and text "has had tremendous influence on [the] growth" of comics (152), but McCloud also recognizes that texts which feature this combination are often seen as "base or simplistic" (141). In this way, comics share a certain kinship with the settler-invader postcolonial rubric: just as the Second World critical position is not "sufficiently pure in its anti-colonialism" to appeal to traditional post-colonial critical circles, comics are not "sufficiently pure" in accepting the "'normal' relations" between text and images (Mitchell 93). McCloud recognizes this critical propensity, stating that "words and pictures *together* are considered, at best, a diversion

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[1]For all references to comics texts, I am employing the generally accepted citation system for the format: Page number, followed by a colon, then the panel number(s).

for the masses, at worst a product of crass commercialism" (140), and *Understanding Comics* is, more than anything, an attempt to repudiate that tendency. Though McCloud's work does not boast a rigorous backing in critical theory and sometimes suffers from this lack, its discursive strength lies in the author's shrewd decision to deliver his delineation of comics form *in* comics form. McCloud draws visual metaphors that extend and contextualize his written arguments, granting *Understanding Comics* the interesting double emplacement of arguing for the ability of comics to express complex ideas *by using* comics to express *that* idea.

I want to pinpoint one particular instance in which he employs this method because it addresses the image/text hybrid space in which comics operate while simultaneously demonstrating that representative operation. McCloud writes (or his cartoon alter-ego *says*, in a speech bubble) that "traditional thinking has long held that truly *great* works of art and literature are only possible when the two are kept at arm's length" (140). McCloud's tendency to slip into generalities and sweeping statements when theoretical specificity and intellectual rigor would serve his case much better is on full display here, but it is his drawing that deepens his point. He draws his cartoon self literally holding the stereotypical binaries of literature (a conglomeration of canonical books, like *War and Peace*, *Heart of Darkness* and the Bible) and of visual art (a variety of paintings) at arm's length from one another (140). In this case, McCloud's point is expressed much more strongly in visual terms which reinforce and expand the significations of the initial verbal statement. Yet this technique also inscribes the contradictory "doubleness" of the comics hybrid in terms of the aforementioned binaries:

McCloud uses words and images in collaboration in order to establish their "traditional" separation. In the comics form, therefore, images and text are employed in *con*junction and in *dis*junction, combining and melding but also colliding and contrasting in ways that re-identify discriminatory classifications while erasing the boundaries those classifications create. This formalistic hybridity is predicated on what W.J.T. Mitchell calls "the problem of the 'imagetext'" (83).

In his book *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Mitchell scrutinizes the representative relationship between image and text, as well as the manner in which that relationship has been envisioned in critical, semiotic, and political terms. Though Mitchell discusses the concept of the "imagetext" in broader aesthetic terms, he does recognize its pertinence to "vernacular composite forms like the comic strip" and "postmodern cartoon novels like *Maus* and *The Dark Knight*" (93), hence sharing a context with McCloud's work. The "imagetext," according to Mitchell, is a term that can be used to interpellate certain hybrid or "composite" aesthetic forms which "connect and cross the shifting boundaries of verbal and visual representation" (88); the "problem" of such an imagetext is that in being understood either "as a composite, synthetic form or as a gap or fissure in representation" (83), it confounds totalizing, "purist" classifications that would separate the verbal and the visual into distinct and unmixed aesthetic camps. Perhaps this is not a problem at all, but I shall respect Mitchell's word choice.

In short, the imagetext is a text that employs both words and images in its aesthetic scope with the recognition of their potential for both collaboration and

dislocation, hybridization and disjunction. Mitchell's term for this "unstable dialectic" (83) is "image/text", the slash that separates them a deft device (at once visual and verbal, iconic and written) that emphasizes the essential division between them in much the same way as the comparative single-word term "imagetext" emphasizes their essential proximity. Moreover, the hyphenated term "image-text" "designates *relations* of the visual and verbal," and Mitchell reminds us that "relations can be many other things besides similarity, resemblance, and analogy" (89). This taxonomy bears an acute resemblance to Johnston and Lawson's affirmation that "colonialism is a relation," as well as Bhabha's insistence on considering colonial hybrid spaces as loci of negotiation. I shall return to these theoretical similarities shortly, but, to sum up: the "imagetext" is where the image and the text meet, the "image/text" is where they are sundered, and the "image-text" is the balance of their relations.

For Mitchell, works of both visual and verbal art exhibit a "heterogeneity of representational structures" (88), and the image/text is "a wedge to pry open" that heterogeneity (100). Though this framework may come across as an excessively formalistic approach to the problem of words and images which disregards the tenets of historicist analysis, that is not entirely Mitchell's intention (nor is it in my own interest to do so). Mitchell stresses that the image/text problem is not merely "formally descriptive," but also "historical" (104). He elaborates this idea as follows, his final proviso being particularly pertinent to the line of inquiry I shall later pursue: "the image/text is neither a method nor a guarantee of historical discovery; it is more like an aperture or cleavage in representation, *a place where history might slip through the*

cracks" (104; emphasis added).

Upon first glance, a complex artistic undertaking of the sort that this phrase prefigures may seem slightly weighty for the generic representational practices of comics, a medium often defined by pervasive stereotypes labelling it "crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare" (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 3:4). "Comics," McCloud writes, "has long been perceived as a linear, plot-driven form, lacking prose's ability to handle layers of meaning – subtext – within a story [...] Skating along the surface without ever probing deeper" (*Reinventing Comics* 31:3). While he goes on to argue several ways in which so-called "art comics" employ subtext, realism and other aesthetic techniques to "probe deeper," he also notes that comics artists such as John Porcellino, Carol Tyler, Gilbert Hernandez, and Chester Brown use "emotional resonance" in the same vein. An amorphous term it certainly is, but McCloud describes this "emotional resonance" as "the forging of an emotional connection between creator and reader without resorting to cheap manipulation" (39:1), to achieve this effect (or affect).

Having made this observation, however, McCloud does not delve into it or even support it, speculating nebulously that comics artists like Brown "take advantage of the cumulative effects of novel-length works to connect with their audiences" (39:1). He then dissembles further, calling the concept of emotional resonance which he introduced "subjective" and decides that he "can't say much about the mechanics of it" (39:2). This is an unfortunate oversight, because two important elements of McCloud's theorizing of comics form in *Understanding Comics* seem to be actively engaged in precisely this

process of connection. McCloud contends that "in pictures [...] meaning is fluid and variable according to appearance. [Pictures] differ from 'real-life' appearance to varying degrees" (*Understanding Comics* 28:2). The cartoon, the most basic representative unit of comics, is the version of the image furthest from "real-life," the most reductive in detail, the most iconic: a "simplified reality" (30:3) which represents certain specific, accentuated details in order to draw the reader's attention to certain meanings within the image (30:5). McCloud calls this process "amplification through simplification" (30:4), allowing artists to "focus our attention on an idea," and sees it as "an important part" of the "special power" of the cartoon (31:3), particularly in comics, a medium which is by its very aesthetic nature "as subtractive [...] as it is additive" (85:3).

Therefore, the cartoon both deconstructs and constructs the meaning of images in comics. Through this *simplification* of the representation, its binaristic certainties are erased and the image moves into a "fluid and variable" space of possible significations. We might call it a hybrid or heterotopic space, predicated on the simple repetition of formalistic polarities while simultaneously constituting a subversion of their representative power. This process leads to an *amplification* of the meanings contained within the image, strengthening those meanings but also (perhaps ironically) multiplying them. The comics medium, based on the technique of amplification through simplification, can therefore accommodate the simple, iconic fantasies of the super-hero genre and the subtle, complex work of alternative comics artists like, among others, Brown. This openness of comics to both text and subtext is largely dependent on the ways in which it involves (and implicates) its readers in those narratives and

significations in ways that are unique to the medium. This involvement is partly achieved through another feature of the cartoon stressed by McCloud: its universality (31:4). McCloud believes that readers tend to identify more readily with a simpler image: "when you enter the world of the cartoon [...] you see yourself" (36:4). This identification is a deeply involved one: "we don't just observe the cartoon, we *become* it!" (36:7). Thus, the reader identifies with the cartoon image to the point of placing him or herself in its place, *forging an emotional connection* between the reader and, through the graphic text, the comics creator, just the sort of "emotional resonance" McCloud would register in *Reinventing Comics* (39:1).

However, this connection, this implicating of the reader in the graphic narrative, is not merely identificatory and emotional; it is also cognitive and intellectual. While it is undeniable that any text requires some level of reader engagement in its narrative process, McCloud argues that comics texts demand a "unique" level of involvement from their readers (*Understanding Comics* 92:3). He points to the empty spaces between panels, known in comics jargon as gutters, as the location where much of the narrative is constructed. Gutters are locations of "limbo" (heterotopic spaces themselves, in a way) in which the "human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (66:4), cognitively connecting the imagetext of one panel with the imagetext of the next. By employing these powerful empty spaces, "the comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and the unseen. The visible and the invisible" (92:2). McCloud calls this process of "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" closure (63:1), and contends that "in a very real sense, comics *is* closure" (67:4), meaning that the perceptual phenomenon is central to

comics' narrative affect.

Along with this participation in the unfolding of the graphic narrative comes the implicating of the reader in that narrative. "As closure between panels becomes more intense," McCloud tells us, "reader interpretation becomes far more elastic... and managing it becomes more complicated for the creator" (*Understanding Comics* 86:2). The less the comics artist chooses to show, the higher the threshold of possible significations formed by the reader becomes. This is another case of amplification through simplification in comics form, albeit one unnoticed by McCloud, but it also forges an emotional connection in consort with the application of the cartoon. By participating on a uniquely perceptive and cognitive level in the construction of the graphic narrative, the reader also necessarily invests in the graphic narrative on both an emotional and an intellectual level. Thus, as McCloud claims, "every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader" (68:3-4).

In my view, these two features of comics form – reader identification with the cartoon and reader implication through closure – are not merely vital to the "emotional resonance" McCloud registers in more "adult" comics work, but are also the buildings blocks of autobiographical and biographical comics. In order to describe these types of comics, which are hybrids of genre and form, I propose the hybridized term "bio-graphic narrative." A distinct term seems to be called for in describing these distinct comics types, which operate in line not merely with the comics form but also with the biographical genre. "Bio-graphic narrative" encodes both the biographic and graphic (comics) narrativity of the form, while the dash emphasizes the relational nature of the hybrid in much the same way that W.J.T.

Mitchell's "image-text" emphasizes the relations between image and text. But if we accept this term and its implications, then how does this genre of comics, with its own distinct formalistic methodology and emotional affect, function in relation to traditional textual biography?

In an article concerning Samuel Johnson's approach to biography, Carl Rollyson quotes Johnson's claim "that biography provides access to universal truths, and that the genre is uniquely equipped to call upon the faculty of empathy – the ability not only to sympathize with other human beings but to put ourselves in their places" (363). Rollyson concedes that this is an "enlightenment belief" (363), but then adopts the position that, in many ways, this understanding of biography has never truly left us. Modern readers of biographies, Rollyson writes, have "an eighteenth-century enthusiasm for the genre" and also display "an involvement with the trajectory and contingency of lives" of the biographical subjects they read about (365). It is this unique ability to "call upon the faculty of empathy" of its readers, to involve them intimately in the narrative provided by the author, that is the major point of intersection between the biographical and comic forms.

Johnson's conception of biography (as filtered through Rollyson), that it "provides access to universal truths," is substantively consistent with McCloud's conception of the role of the cartoon in comics. The biographical genre's customarily acute focus on its subject can *amplify* the meanings and implications suggested by that subject's life much as the cartoon does (though textual biographies tend towards complex portrayals as opposed to the universalized simplicity of the cartoon). In addition, bio-graphic comics authors in effect "call upon the faculty of empathy" of their readers, procuring an intimate involvement in the lives

of their subjects in an aesthetic manner that is not possible in the same way in textual biography. Prominent autobio-graphic narratives like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* employ predominantly "cartoonish" representational tropes to extract fresh possibilities from their authors' experiences of Iran's Islamic Revolution and the Holocaust, respectively.[2] Indeed, McCloud asserts that "a growing number of comics creators in pursuit of a sense of the real sometimes opt for styles of drawing that are, at first blush, anything but" (*Reinventing Comics* 36:1). In this way, both biography and comics count on the ability of readers "not only to sympathize with other human beings but to put [themselves] in their places," and the readers of each form likewise display "an involvement with the trajectory and contingency of lives." The latter intersection occurs at the point of the individual reader's involvement in both the biographical and graphic narratives; comics, as we have seen, demands a high level of reader engagement in unfolding of its narrative, while biography deploys its reader in similar ways to connect the events of the subject's life into coherent significations.

Louis Riel: A Historical Fiction

Some subjects of biographies both textual and graphic confound this will to classification, remaining figures of inscrutability and, we might say, of hybridity. One such

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[2]This is not to say that all autobio-graphic or bio-graphic narratives skew towards simplicity of visual representation. Ho Che Anderson's *King*, a bio-graphic narrative of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life, has been described as "visually eclectic" (Gibson 5) and

hybrid figure is Louis Riel, who was mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Riel's life, particularly his conflicts with the Canadian government, continues to be a subject of contention not only among historians and other academics but also in Canadian society at large. The focal point of debate, however, is not so much on the historical "truths" of Riel's life (which have been fairly rigidly set for some time), but rather what those "truths" reveal, what they *mean*. From historical texts and biographies to plays, poems and, yes, comics, Riel (or the *signified* Riel) is an unstable figure, the implications of his life and of his self constantly in a state of symbolic flux. In his thorough survey of cultural representations of Riel, *The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Culture,* Albert Braz refers to the "tremendous fluidity of aesthetic representations of the Métis leader" in Canadian culture (3):

> He has been depicted variously as a traitor to Confederation, a French-Canadian and Catholic martyr, a bloodthirsty rebel, a New World liberator, a pawn of shadowy white forces, a Prairie political maverick, an Aboriginal hero, a deluded mystic, an alienated intellectual, a victim of Western industrial progress, and even a Father of Confederation. (3)

Braz's thesis is that "most of the purported representations of the politician-mystic are less about him than about their authors and their specific social realit[ies]" (3). He notes further that Riel "continues to be portrayed in rather conflicting ways" in Canadian culture and points towards his "continuing elusiveness" (191). Claude Rocan lends support to these claims, stating that Riel "has become a powerful symbol to Canadians. The question is a symbol of what?" (93). Rocan seems to unwittingly answer his own query immediately: "Riel's life

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employs a sharper and more complex visual style than that of the cartoon, as registered in

captured so many of the important cleavages that are still a vital part of Canada" (93). These "cleavages" reveal deep-seeded historical anxieties which are symptomatic of Canada's postcolonial identity as a settler colony: colonial competition between European rivals, linguistic and cultural barriers, the construction of the railroads and narratives of progress, *métissage*, and the displacement and dispossession of indigenous peoples. All of these anxieties reflect the hybridity of the Canadian settler position; they are all generally representative of the settler subject's relations with either the imperial centre, the indigene, or both.

It is roughly in this hybrid space that the represented figure of Louis Riel – one might say, the *text* of Louis Riel – has been situated. As the list of types of aesthetic representations provided by Braz demonstrates, Riel has been constituted (and continues to the constituted) in the terms of many diametrically opposed and often contradictory binaristic constructions. He can be a traitorous rebel, then he can be a Canadian patriot. He can be a symbolic rallying point for indigenous peoples despite his European-style education and outlook and his occasional antipathy towards the First Nations and their concerns. He is closely associated with Catholicism and yet broke radically and openly from many of its institutional doctrines and beliefs (though he returned to the fold before his death). He is increasingly conceived of as "the only feasible Anglo-Canadian hero" (Braz 202), even though he deeply disagreed with and aggressively resisted the interests and the power of the Anglo-Canadian elite as long as he drew breath. He is constructed as genteel, erudite and intelligent, a model of refinement and

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the aforementioned texts.

reason in the wilderness, but could also be manifested as wild, passionate and of unsound mind, a fanatical, delusional theocrat prepared to resort to violence to achieve his aims.

Now, it would be relatively myopic to suggest that it would be beyond the realm of possibility that Riel, in the balance of his life, was all of these things, at one time or another. Braz writes that "Riel exhibited different selves at different stages of his life," and that "it is possible that two or more seemingly contradictory characterizations of him could be historically accurate" (10). After all, at the risk of sounding redundant, human life is a complex thing. Yet its representation, its imagining through images and texts (and through image-texts) has a way of privileging the binary, of reinscribing what Foucault calls "our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other" (*Order of Things* xv). This will to categorization, this privileging (almost to the point of fetishization) of binaries, is identified primarily with structuralism. According to Foucault, "structuralism [...] is the effort to establish, between elements that could have been connected on a temporal axis, an ensemble of relations that make them appear as juxtaposed, set off against one another, implicated by each other – that makes them appear, in short, as a sort of configuration" ("Of Other Spaces" 22). Of course, it is poststructuralism, an intellectual movement with which Foucault's work is often closely associated, that responds to the institutional establishment of binaries (which, by Foucault's definition, need not be simply *bi*naries and can accommodate more than two points of opposition) in structuralism by rejecting any structure in general. The focus is thus thrown specifically onto the relations between elements independent of structural assumptions, a critical approach that functions in much the same way as Bhabha's hybridity and Mitchell's image-text do.

These points may seem rudimentary to an academic observer, but they are useful to consider in the case of the represented, textualized Riel. Riel has become such a relentlessly *popular* figure, and one identified with and implicated in so many antagonistic political and cultural concerns, that the privileging of structuralist representations of this distinctly un-structuralist individual has become the norm in the popular cultural sphere. There is a pervasive tendency towards either *claiming* Riel or *disowning* him; Braz observes that Anglo-Canadian writers in particular "have been so intent on claiming as their own an individual who appears to have such apprehensions about their country and their ancestors" (5). This can be extended to other cultural representations as well – French-Canadian, Native, non-Canadian – which, whether they claim Riel or disown him, construct him in ways that reinforce the "age-old distinction between the Same and the Other" perceived by Foucault.

The portraits of Riel that emerge from these ideologically-invested representations of him are less a person in its own right than a text, a sort of a "historical fiction." Indeed, many of the disparate texts which together constitute this ur-text of Riel are commonly situated in the genre of historical fiction, itself, in Braz's view, "a hybrid, half of whose name qualifies if not nullifies the other half" (8). Yet another intersection point with the concept of hybridity, historical fiction could be considered the genre of the "Riel text": it is based on historical record, but "does not possess history's claim to veracity" (8) and often adapts, alters and even falsifies historical "fact" in ways that bring the political, social and cultural conflicts and anxieties of said events, which are often glossed over by direct, empirical history, into sharper relief. The text is thus a realm of rich possibility, a discursive and symbolic space of relations that, taken complete, challenges the dominant structuralist binaries of the Métis leader with its

diverse, hybridized complexity. Revivifying Mitchell's dormant phrase, then, I will claim that this hybrid, historically fictive text of Louis Riel is "a place where history might slip through the cracks."

Instead of diluting my focus by examining the cultural text of Riel in its entirety, however (which has already been done quite comprehensively by Braz and others), I have chosen to direct my efforts on a single text concerning Riel, in the mode of a case study. I shall argue that the manner in which Riel has been constructed in cultural discourse informs comics author Chester Brown's perspective on the Métis leader in his recent and popular work *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, and that Brown's text, though deceptively simple, is in fact an exceptionally hybrid text in its artistic form, representational content, and ideological implications. I will begin this inquiry with a consideration of the text in relation to Brown's earlier, quite different comics work, plotting the trajectory which this fascinating comics artist takes en route to his eventual bio-graphic subject. Coupled with this concentration on Brown will be a concentration on the Riel of the bio-graphic narrative, in particular the manner in which the "comic-strip biography" negotiates Riel's unsettling or hybrid persona in image-textual terms. From there I will shift my critical focus to the postcolonial, probing the hybrid text's negotiations of the fraught colonial relationships which always already underlie the historical narrative of Riel, expanding my critique to include not only Brown's text but also Robert Freynet's *Louis Riel en bande dessinée* and Zoran and Toufik's *Louis Riel: Le père du Manitoba*, the two notable bio-graphic narratives on Riel's life published in French,[3] and

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[3]Christian Quesnel's graphic text *Le crépéscule des Bois-Brûlés* also ostensibly employs the events at Red River in 1869/70 in its narrative, but only as a thin backdrop

Margaret Sweatman's novel *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, which offers a unique perspective on the Red River resistance. Finally, I hope to work towards a conclusion that synthesizes the complex, nuanced conception of this controversial figure that emerges from *Louis Riel* with the hybrid model of the binary-unsettling figure who slips through the cracks of history.

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for a juvenile romantic adventure of little style, substance or significance. I will therefore not be discussing Quesnel's text any further in this study.

The Maverick and the Mystic: Chester Brown and Louis Riel

The Maverick: The Comics of Chester Brown

Born in 1960 in Montreal, Quebec, and raised in suburban Châteauguay (Brown *I Never Liked You* 190), Chester Brown has, over the past two decades, become one of Canada's foremost comics artists. Beginning in 1986, Brown's vaunted independent comic series *Yummy Fur* brought him to the attention of the alternative comics community. The contents of *Yummy Fur* were later compiled into graphic novels, or "long-form comics" characterized by their narrative cohesiveness and artistic "seriousness" over book-length (McCloud, *Reinventing Comics* 28-29): *Ed the Happy Clown* (1989), *The Playboy* (1992), *I Never Liked You* (1994), and *The Little Man: Short Strips, 1980-1995* (1998). These were followed by *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, released in 10-issue serial form between 1999 and 2003 before being published in a single 272-page edition, complete with footnotes and index, in September 2003.

In terms of form, content, subject matter, and historical scope, *Louis Riel* is unprecedented in Brown's comics oeuvre, yet certain elements of the book are anticipated in his interesting (though, it must be said, less substantial) earlier works. In these shorter image-texts, Brown gradually develops certain representational concerns and aesthetic predilections that are to later become central to his "comic-strip biography" of the nineteenth-century Métis leader. Therefore, the first part of this chapter will consist of an overview of Brown's key pre-*Louis Riel* texts, focused on identifying the features within them which are likewise important to *Louis Riel*. From this summation, it

should be possible to establish a working conception of Brown as a comics artist and, more importantly, the manner in which his work operates as both an imagetext and a bio-graphic narrative.

Ed the Happy Clown is perhaps the most interesting collection of Brown's early strips, and it is certainly the most imaginative and entertaining. In his preface to the 1992 Vortex Comics edition, Steve Solomos calls *Ed* a "tale of audacious phantasmagoria," and notes that readers and critics, "befuddled" by Brown's unique vision in the series, often labeled it "surrealist," though it is perhaps better described as a downright "uncategorizable experience" (Solomos i,ii). In *Ed*, as in practically all of his work, Brown blazes his own artistic path independent of pre-conceived assumptions about what comics *should* be. It is a path influenced and informed by the peculiar representative language and unrestricted subject matter of underground comics, certainly (the influence of underground icon R. Crumb is especially pervasive), but a unique path it is regardless. Most of all, this controversial underground series demonstrates that, a decade before taking up the unsettling figure of Louis Riel, Brown was already quite active in the business of confounding the generic classifications of the comics medium.

Ed is certainly a confounding work. Brown himself called the series a result of a method of "surrealistic spontaneous creation" (qtd. in Mackay), as seemingly random elements collide and interact before being drawn together into a surprisingly coherent narrative by Brown, in what could be called a generic, representative, and thematic hybrid text. *Ed* is (un)equal parts black comedy, horror, science-fiction, social commentary and surrealist piece, featuring cannibalistic sewer-dwelling pygmies,

alternate dimensions, vampires (and vampire-hunters), violent doctors, a thirteenth-century saint, and a hapless protagonist who, infamously, awakes to find Ronald Reagan's head transplanted onto his penis. Brown touches on scatology, pop mythology, sex, religion, homophobia, science, health care and social mores in a graphic narrative that is alternately absorbing, disturbing and hilarious. The compiled, "graphic novel" version of *Ed* is interesting in that it reveals Brown's self-described improvisational approach to crafting his larger narrative (Interview with Epp). The "Introductory Pieces" section is a series of loosely-connected absurdist strips featuring space aliens, the Frankenstein monster, a man who cannot stop defecating, the "Adventures in Science" program, and, in one of the later, longer strips, a hospital janitor named Chet Doodley, who loses his hand. These shorter pieces (almost certainly initially conceived as humorous one-off works) are picked up, extended and "explained" in the later editions of the series, which begin to establish a greater narrative scope. Called a work of "genius" by some and "snot-nosed juvenilia" by others (Mackay), *Ed* may appear initially to have little in common with *Louis Riel*; nonetheless, the two graphic narratives share several thematic and representational concerns.

The most obvious common theme between the two works is that of religious faith. Brown has stated that "the religious aspect of [Riel's] story was... a draw," even going so far as to say that he "related" to Riel on the basis of religious faith (Interview with Arnold). Brown has described himself as being "religious for years and years," but without any strong affiliations to a particular church or dogma; his faith seems to be grounded in curiosity and doubt, as evinced by his acknowledged interest in the

theological work of eighteenth century mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. He even began work on comic adaptations of the Gospels in the late 1980s, though he claims the experience has left him "as confused as ever" about his faith (Interview with Epp). He tackles religious faith, and the extreme actions and reactions that are often a result of it, in one of the many intertwined subplots in *Ed*. In Chapter Two (41-60), Brown provides a nuanced critique of religion with the subplot of Chet Doodley and the mysterious loss of his right hand, which leads Chet to believe that God is punishing him for his adulterous affair with a younger woman. Though the implications of faith are critiqued in this instance, the conclusion of the chapter – Chet "miraculously" regains use of his reattached and limp right hand after brutally murdering his mistress (60: 1-6) – seems to substantiate those beliefs and their violent manifestation: an end that justifies the means. Still, the gory brutality of Brown's representation of this act likewise contains a critical rebuke of religious fanaticism.

Brown's personal position on matters of faith and belief, "keeping [his] beliefs vague," as he puts it (Interview with Epp), informs his approach to religious themes in *Ed* (and later in *Louis Riel*) with both an anti-institutional skepticism and an empathetic benefit of the doubt. Indeed, the representative vein of anti-institutional skepticism is a rich one in this book; it may be the most consistent, unifying element in a work otherwise characterized by its wild disparity. There are various instances in which Brown's symbolic deconstruction of social assumptions is visible. The police in the *Ed* world, for example, wear black masks around their eyes like cartoon robbers (first appearance in 22:2-4). The masks are a deft, easily-recognizable image suggesting criminality and

corruption amongst those supposedly serving law and order, an implication borne out by the text of officers' words in the strips: when they find Chet unconscious and missing a hand, the police chief suggests that they "save ourselves the trouble" of investigating "another crime we won't be able to solve" by putting Chet in a bag and dumping him in the river (22:2-3). The collaborative use of image and text (of imagetext) in this case imparts a sharp sense of distrust of institutional authority.

From the very first strip in the series, however, in which Ed is informed by a smug doctor that the hospital for sick children has burned down "and everyone died except us doctors" (3:1), Brown's anti-establishment sentiments are at their most vitriolic where science and medicine are concerned, likely related to his stated "skepticism" toward claims of scientific veracity in certain matters (Interview with Epp). Whenever doctors appear in *Ed* (and they often do), they are characterized almost entirely negatively: they are nonchalant, irresponsible, uninformed, and wholly unconcerned about the well-being of their patients, even to the point of being malevolent and violent towards them (51:1-6, 206:3-207:2). Science in general, though, and not merely the medical profession, is the target of Brown's skepticism, as displayed by its focal point, the "Adventures in Science" strips in the "Introductory Pieces" section (1-27).

From the first of these strips, proclaimed with mock pomposity as telling "stories about the men and women who bravely shape the world of tomorrow!" (8:1), Brown employs a unique brand of dark, absurdist satire to destabilize scientific claims to authority. The strips are framed as episodes of a popular television show, marking the commodification and "dumbing-down" of complex scientific knowledge for a mass

audience while destabilizing the established assumptions of the scientific method with the absurdist wit of a Monty Python sketch. In addition, we are introduced to the supposedly sober scientific minds behind the show later in the narrative, and they prove to be murderously homophobic (141:6-145:8). Though this mistrust of the objectivity and empiricism of science and medicine displayed in this early work continues to be an interest of Brown's through his composition of *Louis Riel* (as has religion and distrust of institutions and authority), even his occasionally inspired instances of socio-political satire come off as brash, unfocused iconoclasm. For all its wicked creative verve, *Ed the Happy Clown* is generally more frantic and scattershot in its style and execution than the subtler, more assured works Brown would produce subsequently.

The first of these more mature graphic texts is *The Playboy*, and it inaugurated an autobiographical turn in Brown's work which would last until he began the *Louis Riel* serials in the late 1990s, reflecting a general "trend in the medium" that Brown is often crediting as helping to lead (Interview with Arnold). Focusing with an unabashed obsessiveness on Brown's own very bashful obsession with *Playboy* magazine in his youth and his increasingly methodical efforts to conceal the magazine, *The Playboy* is a sparser, more restrained graphic text than *Ed the Happy Clown*. Where *Ed*'s pages are busy with multiple panels of comic action (a steady six panels per page in the middle chapters, up to 8 or 10 in the more packed later chapters), *The Playboy* boasts one, two, or (at most) three panels per page, the black space beyond the panel borders often dominating the composition. There is also a permeability to the panel borders of this memoir-like reminiscence that was not the case in the imaginative fantasy *Ed*; practically

whenever a speech bubble appears, it spills over the edge of the panel into the blackness beyond. Perhaps Brown does this in order to subtly destabilize the parameters of his autobiographical memoir, suggesting with this consistent visual touch that his panels cannot contain the entire significance of these events.

The panels in *The Playboy* are also less busy with visual action and representation than they tended to be in *Ed*. The spatial hegemony in the panels often belongs to the backgrounds which, despite the book's suburban setting (or perhaps in ironic reflection of those mundane surroundings), are drawn as panoramic scenes that dwarf Brown's youthful comic alter-ego (a few examples in *The Playboy*: 17:1, 46:1, 66:1, 111:2). This visual motif, a metaphor for the young Brown's secrecy and isolation in his patronage of *Playboy*, recurs in *I Never Liked You* and becomes rather dominant in *Louis Riel*, but as in that later "comic-strip biography," its representative effects (and its emotional affect) are largely achieved through the contrast of these wider views with more intimate panels of closed, personal space (example in *The Playboy*: 34:1, 63:2, 77:1). In *Reinventing Comics*, Scott McCloud registers the possibilities of this sort of sophisticated signification in "mature" comics: "The combination of simpler, more selective imagery and comics' many frozen moments lends a less fleeting, less transitory feeling to each moment [...] imbuing even incidental images with a potentially symbolic charge" (33:3).

The sense of open stillness to Brown's panels, to paraphrase McCloud, grants a symbolic charge to even the most incidental images. There is a bittersweet poetry to the image of young Chester's semen dripping from his hands after he masturbates to the

centrefold Playmate (*The Playboy* 43:1-2),[1] a moment that could come off as cheap and exploitive but is instead invested with ample gravitas by Brown's careful selection of images. This symbolic charge is heightened by Brown's particular approach to representing emotion in his characters, an approach that came to fruition in *Louis Riel*, but is perceptible in doses in his earlier autobio-graphic memoirs. In the Foreword to the Riel book, Brown names Harold Gray's "Little Orphan Annie" comic strip as "visual inspiration" for his drawing style in the book (for a sample of Gray's artwork, see Becker, 64-65). The particular valences of this "inspiration" shall be explored further in a moment, but Brown contextualizes Gray's influence in several of his interviews promoting *Louis Riel*. Perhaps the most important influence, in Brown's view, was what he calls Gray's "emotional restraint," expressed in the "blank eyes" of his comic characters: "I like the lack of emotional expression there. *I'm a big believer in emotional restraint*" (qtd. in Leshinski; emphasis added). In another interview, Brown mentions the "*de-emphasized* emotional reactions" in Gray's work as influencing his approach to *Louis Riel* (Interview with Arnold). I stress this de-emphasizing of emotional reactions because I see it as key to the effect (and affect) achieved by Brown not only in the *Louis Riel* imagetext, but also in the "richly poetic" *I Never Liked You* (Leshinki).

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[1]Religion is a much more proscribed theme in *The Playboy*. The first appearance of young Chester Brown is in a local church (5:1-9:2), and there is a striking visual reference to Brown's dead mother (whose staunch religious morality had a strong effect on her son, as we learn in *I Never Liked You*), portrayed as an angel looking down disapprovingly at him from a cloud as he hides a copy of *Playboy* in a field. 43:1 makes a subtler but sharper visual link: young Chester's hands are folded as if in prayer after masturbating. No explicit link is ever made between conventional religious mores and Brown's guilt over his *Playboy* habit, but the calculated imagery in this panel makes an

I Never Liked You, like *The Playboy*, is a comic-strip reminiscence of Brown's teenage years in Châteauguay, though it focuses on his fraught relationships with *real* women (namely the girls in his neighbourhood and his mother) rather than the feminine fantasies of *Playboy* magazine. The panel placement in the book is similar to that of its predecessor, sparsely-arranged and floating on a blank background (white, this time), though *I Never Liked You* can feature anywhere from a single panel (1, 98, 180) to eight (40) or nine (124) per page. The borders are firmer than in *The Playboy*; the speech bubbles are always rigidly contained within the panels, and only in two consecutive panels (78:1, 79:1) do any thought bubbles extend beyond the edges. While the panels tend to be busier and more detailed than in *The Playboy*, there is still a definite sparsity to them, as well as many of the symbolically-charged "frozen moments" (42:1, 108:1, 152:1) and panoramic, character-isolating "wide shots" (9:1, 102:4, 138:3) that dominated Brown's previous book.

What has changed (one might say even improved) from *The Playboy* to *I Never Liked You* is Brown's authorial voice, his willingness to trust the reader to tease out the inherent symbolic and emotional power of his drawings and his words without enforcing firm interpretations upon them. In *The Playboy*, the narrative of the young Chester Brown's experiences with *Playboy* is "told" not by the self-contained flexible reality of his panels, but more so by a comic version of the contemporary Brown himself, a small, flying trickster-figure with sprite wings who is first identified, with just a touch of irony, as "Chester Brown: World Famous Cartoonist" (2:1). The winged Brown flutters

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implicit one.

through panels (46:2), hovers over his younger self inside them (74:1), and stands still outside them (121), all the while providing a running narration of expository detail (25:1) and explanations of young Chester's feelings and thoughts (44:1-2). The effect of this is generally intrusive: when the young Chester buys a *Playboy* and takes it back to his grandmother's house, he throws up his dinner due to the guilt and anxiety over the magazine being discovered (130:3-134:2), but the episode loses some of its resonance when the mercurial sprite-narrator talks openly about his younger self's "fear and emotional turmoil" (133:2). Indeed, Brown's use of this narrator figure undercuts the Gray-like emotional restraint of the imagetext in *The Playboy* by openly stating emotional significations that he himself would later prefer to allow his drawings to merely imply.

Though *I Never Liked You* has the occasional narration (in the form of narration blocks, boxes of authorial-voice text usually placed along the top of a panel, as in 1:1, for example), it is infrequent and unobtrusive, generally employed for simple exposition. There is one exception, one instance in which Brown assumes the voice of the omniscient narrator to delve into his comic alter-ego's relationship with Connie, one of the girls from across the street (47:5-49:2). Besides these few panels, the balance of the book features the de-emphasized emotional reactions Brown so admired in Gray's work, or to put it more accurately, a de-emphasized *representation* of those reactions. Brown's characters are not soulless robots; they do express a range of human emotions, sometimes quite strong ones (154:1-157:1), but unlike *The Playboy*'s sprite-narrator, who would swoop in with force-fed conclusions on the implications of the imagetext, Brown lets *I Never Liked*

You's loosely-connected series of events speak for themselves. This approach destabilizes firm, concrete assumptions (be they moral, emotional, or symbolic) about the narrative he provides, allowing the readers of his comic to map their own meanings and conclusions onto the cartoon faces of his characters.

This tendency of Brown's is particularly noticeable (and notable) in the guise of his younger cartoon self. A subtler approach to the emotionality of those around him would seem to make self-evident aesthetic sense; Brown cannot possibly fully comprehend or (by extension) fully represent the true feelings and thought processes of the people he knew in his youth. Yet the most emotionally-inscrutable character in *I Never Liked You* is the teenaged Chester, whose emotional state the adult Brown is in a rather unique position to translate accurately into his imagetext. Though the teenaged Chester's frame of mind is often imparted via both images (31:1-4, where Chester imagines throwing himself in front of a truck) and text (124:1-9, contemplating how to proceed in his relationship with Sky),[2] his manner is emotionally-restrained to an almost absurd degree.

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[2]The course of action Chester decides to take – making Sky a symbolically-charged drawing of a skeleton reaching up for a bird (125:1-126) – demonstrates Brown's keen awareness, even in his youth, of the representational power of iconography. However, in a clever moment later in *I Never Liked You*, Brown comments self-reflexively on looking for meanings imbedded in visual representations. When Chester is questioned about the meaning of his drawing for Sky by Connie's younger sister Carrie (who is also interested in him) and she reads it exactly right (152:2-153:3), he replies, "No, I never use symbolism" (153:4). The dramatic irony is registered by the reader, who has already seen Chester's thoughts while drawing it (though Carrie does not believe his explanation either [154:1]). The episode therefore contains not only an affirmation of Brown's understanding of the image as an icon, but also a self-reflexive critique of the artist's attempt to rein in the implications of that iconography.

Brown has spoken of the "blank eyes" of Gray's characters as a signal of his de-emphasized approach to emotional restraint in comics, and he generally employs a similar technique in *I Never Liked You*, hiding Chester's eyes behind glasses (first done in 10:2). In representational terms, eyes are indeed "windows to the soul," in comics as in life. A blankness in them, or even an absence of them, presupposes a sense of unreadability, of neutrality; McCloud's cartoon representation of himself in both of his comics theory books also uses pupil-obscuring spectacles, most likely in the interest of accentuating his sober critical perspective. The image of skinny, long-haired Chester, his eyes hidden behind large glasses and his body language awkward but expressionless, is the distinctive image of *I Never Liked You* (92:1-96:1, 122:5-123:1). Even when his eyes are visible, though, there is little in the way of perceptible emotional commitment in them (103:5, 129:2-3); overall, Brown's representation of himself as a teenager is visually marked by great emotional subtlety, a subtlety which will become a defining characteristic of *Louis Riel*.

Before embarking on his bio-graphic narrative of Riel, however, Brown compiled a handful of the most notable short strips from the first fifteen years of his comics career in *The Little Man*, first published in 1998 (a new edition came out in June 2006 with "revis[ed] and expand[ed]" footnotes [159]). These strips vary in quality, length and thematic content, but many of the themes and predilections that mark Brown's longer works are likewise visible in his contemporaneous shorter works (and understandably so). The macabre black humour and gory imagery that were the stylistic hallmarks of *Ed the Happy Clown* are conspicuous in "Walrus Blubber Sandwich" (7-9), "My Old

Neighbourhood" (20), and "An American Story" (35-37), while Brown's religious curiosity is further evinced by "The Twin" (38-41), an adaptation of "an ancient Gnostic story" (38) that most modern Christian sects would likely find heretical.

Furthermore, the autobiographical realist style of *The Playboy* and *I Never Liked You* continues to be refined in "Helder" (47-67), "Showing 'Helder'" (70-101), "The Little Man" (102-20), and "Danny's Story" (128-41), and the anti-establishment sentiment that is so pervasive in *Ed* finds further outlet in "Anti-Censorship Propaganda" (44-45) and "My Mom Was a Schizophrenic" (152-57). Of particular interest are Brown's detailed notes (similar to those at the end of *Louis Riel*, which will be discussed further in the next chapter). These are not merely footnotes on his imagetexts, however; they act as both a professional and personal autobiography for Brown as well, granting ample insight into the strips included in *The Little Man* but also into Brown's artistic thought processes and compositional methods. The notes are nowhere more detailed than for the contentious "My Mom Was a Schizophrenic," the most important strip from *The Little Man* in relation to *Louis Riel* and, consequently, the only strip from the book that I shall examine in depth.

"My Mom Was a Schizophrenic" makes a compelling, well-sourced argument that what is commonly known as schizophrenia (and as mental illness in general) is largely an invention of the psychiatric and medical institutions to explain and to restrain "socially unacceptable beliefs and behaviour" (154:1). Brown's thesis, as such, is as follows: "I'm not denying that most schizophrenics suffer – I'm questioning *why* they suffer. Is it because they have an illness, or is it because of the set and setting that [...]

society gives them?" (157:2-3). He takes it even further in his closing panels, quoting R.D. Laing's speculation that perhaps schizophrenia is "itself a natural way of healing our own appalling state of alienation called normality" (157:9). As mentioned above, the perspective espoused by Brown in this strip is well in line with the anti-establishment and anti-medical sentiment of *Ed*, but it should also be familiar to scholars through Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "schizoanalysis" in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Both these works see in madness an implicit challenge to the post-Enlightenment hierarchy of reason and truth that post-structuralism likewise disputes, and generally share Brown's conception of mental illness as a check on anti-social behaviour and thought.

The graphic text that establishes this position is rather static and direct, consisting mostly of a cartoon alter-ego of Brown and various caricatured writers staring out of the panels and verbally expressing their opinions on the subject. Therefore, unlike almost all the rest of Brown's works, the strip is primarily image/text, locating much more representative authority in words than in images and including little in the way of productive image-text negotiation. Some lingering iconoclastic tendencies are visible, with the narrator casually removing media devices reiterating the accepted discourse on schizophrenia that he rejects (152:2-4, 153:4-6). This well-cultivated tone of intellectual detachment masks the intensely personal nature of Brown's point of view on the subject. As portrayed in *I Never Liked You* and elaborated on in *The Little Man*'s notes, Brown's mother "died in a mental institution in 1976," an event which led to Brown becoming

"curious about mental illness is – about what had happened to her" (171). The only hint of this event's influence on the eventual composition of "My Mom Was a Schizophrenic" is the title of the strip, a subtle testament to Brown's investment in the issue.

The Mystic: The Unsettling Subject of *Louis Riel*

As compelling as Brown's position-taking and his central contentions are, "My Mom Was a Schizophrenic" is hardly as absorbing on an image-textual level as his other works, and is more notable as a experimental synthesis of comics form and literary and historical sources. That said, the strip prefigures *Louis Riel* more than any of Brown's earlier works, and its insight into Brown's interest in and perspective on Riel is vital to achieving an understanding of his bio-graphic narrative of the Métis leader. Brown himself cites the research that the "Schizophrenic" strip required as inspiration for taking on the similarly research-heavy *Louis Riel* project, along with (more importantly from a critical perspective) "the whole schizophrenia angle" (Interview with Arnold) and "the whole religious part" (Interview with Epp). But it is not merely these intertwined themes that Brown carries from his previous work into *Louis Riel*, but also his *position* on those themes and the representative approach that positioning presages.

Brown's views on mental illness, as expressed through the "Schizophrenic" strip, have a direct effect on his treatment of Riel in his bio-graphic narrative, which focuses most often on the Métis leader's prophetic/mystic faith and the related questions concerning his sanity (or the lack thereof). Since Brown has expressed his conviction,

through the strip, that mental illness is an invention of psychiatrists to "diagnose" (and thus restrict) the "socially unacceptable beliefs and behaviour" of patients, then it would follow that his representation of Riel would sympathize with the Métis leader who was institutionalized on the basis of his beliefs and his behaviour that related to those beliefs.

In fact, in the notes at the end of *Louis Riel*, Brown intimates just that, referring to the "Schizophrenic" strip and stating emphatically that "Riel's behaviour and beliefs in late 1875 and early 1876 [when he was placed in an asylum] weren't symptoms of an illness" (255). This assertion is in line with Thomas Flanagan's argument in *Louis "David" Riel: "Prophet of the New World"* that "much of what strikes modern readers as incomprehensible and therefore insane makes sense in the context of Riel's [...] worldview [...]. A hasty resort to medical labels risks rendering this phase of Riel's life meaningless, when in fact it is the key to understanding his character" (80; Brown quotes Flanagan to similar effect in his notes [255]).

Thus, Brown's representation of the hybrid figure Riel proceeds from his interest in religious issues but crystallizes in Riel's expression of his increasingly mystical strain of Catholic faith; the point of intersection is then the negative response of contemporary society to this unsettling figure whose beliefs and behavior struck the social order as "incomprehensible and therefore insane," leading the agents of that order to make a "hasty resort to medical labels" which sought to erase Riel's hybrid identity or, rather, re-brand it in terms of mental instability. Though many other facets of Riel's life, beliefs, and personality are depicted in *Louis Riel*, this conception of Riel as unsettling to settler society was not merely due to his ethnic identity as a "half-breed" or his alterity from the

Anglo-Saxon Protestant colonial elite as a Francophone Catholic (he unsettled Franco-Catholics nearly as much, not to mention the First Nations and even the Métis themselves at times). It also bore some relation to his religious fervor and his defying of rigid social binaries, and these factors are very much, as Flanagan puts it, "the key to understanding his character."

Brown's version of Riel, therefore, keenly incorporates synecdochal elements that reference the encroaching prophetic self-figurations of the Métis leader. A good example of his method can be discerned in his in-panel *mise-en-scène*: as Riel makes the decision to confront the anti-Métis agitators in Red River, Brown draws him writing at a desk, books close at hand (27:2-4). This is Riel the scholar, the statesman, the "Father of Confederation" (as many, particularly of Métis descent or sympathies, have argued he was), and most importantly, the man of reason and of civilization; it is the version of Riel that is most acceptable, most palatable, to modern liberal-humanist Canadian society (and to the society of his own time), the Riel that has statues built in his honour. But Brown subtly complicates the image, adding a twist that reminds the astute reader of the less palatable, more unsettling side of Riel: on the wall behind him, shaded, is a crucifix. It is still 1869, and Riel's radical, prophetic faith had not yet truly manifested itself in any public or extroverted manner, but even here, it looms over him in the form of a recognizable Catholic symbol placed prominently but ominously in the frame, a reminder that the seeds of his subsequent mysticism (a mysticism grounded in Catholic doctrine) have already been sown.

When a wall-mounted crucifix appears again, it is at a crucial point in the

emergence and development of Riel's self-construction as a mystical prophet. There is a crucifix visible above Bishop Bourget's bed in the Hôtel-Dieu as a troubled Riel asks him for spiritual guidance (99:5-100:5). The symbol is at least partially perceptible in each one of these frames, except, fascinatingly, in the last; here, it is obscured completely by Bourget's speech-bubble, which contains his fateful, charged declaration to Riel that "God has given you a mission" (100:5). In visual terms, Bourget's words, which were "to become, in Riel's mind, the authentication par excellence of his [prophetic] mission" (Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel* 52), take precedence over the symbol of established Catholicism. Text blocks out image, in fact, much as Riel's belief in his prophetic mission and the new church he would found (a belief predicated upon Bourget "anointing" him with these words) came to replace elements of accepted Catholic doctrine and practice.[3] This is not merely accomplished through the use of the comics-specific speech bubble, however, but also through the cartoon-based technique of "amplification through simplification."

Brown's note on this episode acknowledges that the scene is a hybrid of a pair of disparate sources: "Riel did fall to his knees in front of Bishop Bourget's bed on January

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[3]I feel obliged to acknowledge at this point that Riel's relationship to Catholicism and its doctrines, while complex and troubled, was ultimately characterized by fierce loyalty. The proposed church of which he was to be the founder was to be above all "an outgrowth of Catholicism resulting in two mutually co-ordinated and friendly branches of the Church, one in the Old World, the other in the New" (Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel* 172), and Riel came to view it less as a break with Roman Catholicism than as a fulfillment of it. Of course, Riel officially recanted his heresies so that he could receive the sacraments before his death (178), though Flanagan feels that despite this Riel "considered himself a prophet to the very end" (189) and Brown leaves that possibility open in the graphic text (*Louis Riel* 233:6-234:2).

8, 1874, but the words I have Bourget saying in this panel come from a letter that he wrote to Riel on July 14, 1875" (254). In *Louis "David" Riel*, Thomas Flanagan reproduces the letter and writes that "Riel carried this letter with him day and night, and pondered its words until he could repeat them by heart." Furthermore, Flanagan states that "within a few months he began to think that the 'mission' of which Bourget spoke was [...] a unique vocation conferred on him by God" (52). Of Riel's encounter with Bourget in Montreal, he writes: "years later, when he was fully convinced of being a prophet, he remembered the episode as a miraculous cure, another sign demonstrating the authenticity of his mission" (44).

Though Riel's self-conception as a prophet would evolve greatly over the decade that would follow (an evolution Flanagan traces carefully through the course of *Louis "David" Riel*), these two separate episodes constitute the strongest catalysts for what might be called his "awakening" as a charismatic spiritualist, an awakening that is "the key" to "the overall pattern of his career" (Flanagan 80). Brown's creative act of conflating them into a single incident can be seen as conforming to McCloud's concept of "amplification through simplification." If the comic form is visually predicated on the "simplified reality" of the cartoon, then it can be extrapolated that it is likewise *representationally* predicated on that same "simplified reality." Just as the simplification of the characters amplifies our reactions to them, the simplification of their actions amplifies the larger meanings and implications of those actions. Thus, what Brown achieves by conflating these two events is a symbolic re-entrenching of certain prevalent valuations of Riel's self-construction as "the Prophet of the New World," a self-

construction that would begin to unsettle the unbending social order of his time and place.

The importance of this moment on Riel's psyche is artistically underscored by Brown via a sudden, striking Expressionistic flourish (101:1) representing Riel's spiritual (re-)awakening. Brown's art in this panel departs from the essential (albeit cartoon) realism of the rest of the bio-graphic narrative and anticipates Riel's next mystical experience in the text, which constitutes an even greater departure from realist representation. As he prays on a mountaintop outside of Washington, D.C., Riel is suddenly surrounded by fire and hears the voice of God, which tells Riel he has "a mission to accomplish for the benefit of humanity" (107:1) and then transports him "to the fourth heaven to explain the nations of the earth" to him (107:4). The scene, like the meeting with Bourget, is a synthesis of "two mystical experiences that Riel claimed to have had" (254), another conflated (and thus amplified) representative moment. While it may be tempting to characterize the panel sequence as an instance of magic realism, it seems to be more in line with Brown's statement that he felt that "[Riel's] visions were in some sense true [...] I think he had real experiences" (Interview with Arnold). Thus, in Brown's imagetext, Riel's visions are handled not as hallucinations or as visual metaphors but as "realist" representations, a bulwark against the entrenched assumption of rational society that Riel's purported mystical experiences were manifestations of mental imbalance.

Soon after, Brown depicts rational Canadian society's attempts to rein in Riel's unsettling faith-based behaviour, which the medical profession considers to be proof

positive that Riel is "obviously completely insane" (110:2). Given Brown's position on what he perceives as society's lack of "acceptance of aberrant behaviour" (Interview with Epp), it should not be surprising that his representation of Riel's committing to a mental institution is sympathetic to the man being (in his view) unfairly defined as "mentally ill." The empathetic cartoon is deployed masterfully as Riel is straight-jacketed and deprived of his treasured prayer-book: Brown shows Riel lying, still and silent, on the floor, closing his eyes and then giving a faltering statement of the prayer-book's personal meaning for him, with lines of anguish on his face and the border of his speech-bubble vacillating with emotion (110:3-5). Demonstrating the influence of Gray's de-emphasized emotional reactions, the cartoon face Brown gives Riel visually invites the reader into the experience of the bio-graphic subject subtly and elegantly, with a bare minimum of aesthetic embellishment. But the sequence leading up to these panels is much more complex than a simple case of reader identification; it is also a fascinating negotiation of Riel's unsettling identity made all the more demanding by the reader's implication in the trajectory of the subject's life.

This negotiation revolves around Riel's "prophet name," David, reflecting the Métis leader's identification with the biblical King David, which Flanagan claims would eventually become "almost literal" (*Louis "David" Riel* 43). Though both Riel's identification with David and his use of the name have deep roots, which even Flanagan only traces to a small extent, Brown identifies the name clearly with his subject's prophetic identity: when Riel has his mountaintop vision, the voice of God refers to him as "Louis David Riel" (107:1), telling him, "David is the name I give you as my prophet

of the New World" (107:3). Immediately following this mystical re-naming, Brown cuts to one of Riel's friends talking to a doctor at a lunatic asylum; amongst other "aberrant behaviour" cited as grounds for committing Riel, the man says that "sometimes he thinks he's the biblical King David" (107:6). In the space of a single page, the name "David" is granted to Riel in a fantastical, supernatural vision and then used as evidence for his insanity by two professional men in a sterile office; the disjunction is obvious, and image-textually encodes the basic incommensurability of Riel's mystical self-construction in the eyes of society at large.

The dueling conceptions of identity then come into direct conflict as Riel is committed, his own mystical, hybrid self-conception contending with the oppressive categorizing impulse of the dominant society's medical institution with the name "David" placed symbolically in the middle. Ostensibly for his own protection while in Canada illegally, the asylum administrators elect to refer to Riel as "Mr. David," and the lead doctor calls him by this name as they try to commit him (108:4). Though Riel himself would use "David" as "a pseudonym to throw pursuers off the track" in his fugitive years (Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel* 43), in the internal logic of the bio-graphic narrative it is a curious name to choose. With foreknowledge of Riel's "insane" identification with David, the institution *encourages* that identification, indeed makes it a matter of official record. Even more interesting is the fact that Riel, who had apparently accepted the new moniker when it was bestowed upon him by a supernatural power, now rejects it when given to him by a social institution: "My name is Louis Riel" (108:6). For corroborating evidence of this, he even points out his name in his prayer-book (109:1-2), a symbol of

Riel's faith that is both doctrinal and deeply personal (110:5), reflecting the origins of his self-founded prophetic church.

The sequence deepens after Riel's re-assertion of his identity, as a desiccated-looking nun snatches the prayer-book away from him and tears out the textual proof of Riel's real name, telling him, "You will be known here as Mr. David!" (109:3-4). Riel reacts strongly to this, and is forcibly straight-jacketed (109:5-110:1). It is a complicated sequence with contradictory implications, but, in a nutshell, the institutional agents (comprising both the medical and ecclesiastical branches) are forcibly utilizing "Mr. David" as an indicator for Riel's unsettling, unstable identity while Riel himself (futilely) resists the discriminatory classification. But the institution is not only successful in merging Riel's mystically-grounded behavior with the medical conception of mental illness that Brown treats with such contempt, it erases Riel's self-constructed prophetic identity in the process.

Part Two of *Louis Riel* ends with Dr. Howard, the lead representative of the rational forces imprisoning Riel in the asylum, "confiscating" his prominent patient's Bible for "contributing to [his] insanity" (112:5). This moment proceeds from the earlier prayer-book incident and anticipates Riel's disagreements with the doctrines of the Catholic clergy in Part Three (142:6-143:3). The final two pages of the section then focus on the image of the door to Riel's cell as he stretches his hands out through the bars, attempting to re-avow the prophetic identity that has been co-opted and redefined as "insane" by the medical institution; he shouts impotently, "I'm the Prophet of the New World!" (113:4) and "Bishop Bourget is the new Pope!" (114:3), but is only met by

silence. Then, Riel's face – a window to the bio-graphic subject's experience only pages before – disappears from the barred window, and in the final two panels even his hands vanish (114:5-6). This is a literal defacement of the subject, doubly inscribing not only the effort by "sane" society to classify the hybrid figure Riel as the binaristic opposite of "insane," but also an expression of Brown's opinion from the "Schizophrenic" strip that society has made the "experience" of what is calls schizophrenia or mental illness "virtually illegal" (*Little Man* 156:9-157:1).

Riel's unsettling identity, always already grounded in his self-identification as God's chosen prophet in *Louis Riel*, is negotiated further in the midst of the 1885 Rebellion in Part Three, as Brown demonstrates a certain guarded ambivalence towards his protagonist's beliefs in relation to those turbulent events (145:1-5, 190:1-191:4). This gives way to the starkly-drawn, morally-totalized courtroom drama of Part Four, couched in the binaristic terms of sanity vs. insanity, with Riel's *defense* attempting to establish his insanity largely on the basis of his mystical beliefs, essentially invalidating his "mission" in the process (211:4). But Brown returns to the imagery of defacement previously employed at the end of Part Two at the bio-graphic narrative's conclusion, making a final statement concerning the "unsettling" Riel by utilizing McCloud's concept of "closure" in an insightful manner.

Brown departs from his rigid, six-panels-per-page structure only a few times in his narrative, implicating the reader in the narrative process at key moments by refusing certain vital representations that the interpretative participant must then provide. Panels are occasionally left entirely blank, often during momentous events or decisions: at Riel's

trial, for example, the jury's deliberation preceding sentencing is represented (or *not* represented) by a blank, black panel (230:1). Strictly speaking, a blank panel is not "the gutter," to revisit McCloud's terminology, but it is an aesthetic construction that serves the same purpose, one that is possessed of considerably more representative intentionality than the gutter-impelled closure discussed in the introduction. The most striking example of this narrative technique is Riel's death, an absolutely central event in the bio-graphic narrative.

Brown's depiction of the moment of Riel's hanging is a subtle but powerful utilization of the graphic narrative form that pushes his interrogation of Riel's representative identity even further. Moments such as this are key in biographies, both traditionally textual and bio-graphic; few other narrative genres come pre-provided with such a definite conclusion as the death of its subject grants to biography. Still, as unknowable as any subject's life inherently is, the death of the biographical subject is that much more inscrutable. The tendency in biographic (and bio-graphic) narratives is to tie the death into the larger themes of the life-narrative, to cast it as a fulfillment of the rest of the subject's actions, a conclusion to the biographical argument. Brown's representation of Riel's death follows the negotiation of the bio-graphic subject's unsettling identity noted elsewhere in the imagetext, and it employs the full range of methods characteristic of the bio-graphic narrative to convey a potent closing statement to this "comic-strip biography."

In the closing pages of the book (237-38), Brown details his subject's last moments on the scaffold. First, Brown shows Riel's head being covered with a hood (237:5); though this detail is consistent with the historical record of Riel's hanging (Siggins 445), it also

serves to hide Riel's cartoon face through this climactic moment. The doorway to reader identification with Riel that was consistently left open throughout the bio-graphic narrative is now suddenly closed; we can no longer put ourselves in his place, nor can we put ourselves in the place of Riel's only companion on the scaffold (besides the hangman), Father André, who is overcome with emotion and hides his face in his hands (238:1-5). As in previous instances of this sort of representation, Brown leaves the effect of events upon his characters to the reader's imagination.

Brown, however, still has a compelling concluding use of the gutter to employ. In 238:4, the trap door is opened and Riel drops from view, and the rope is taut in 238:5. Brown has composed his panels in such a way that the scaffold's trap door is located at the very bottom of the panel (236:6 is the first panel in which the composition appears). Thus, when the door is sprung and Riel falls out of view to his death, he seems to literally disappear beyond the frame of the panel, and seems to be departing beyond the clearly defined boundaries of Brown's bio-graphic narrative. This representative illusion is reinforced by the final panel, or more accurately, by its absence: where 238:6 *should be* (and Brown's regimented panel pattern leads the reader to expect it), there is not even so much as a blank panel, only a blank *space*. This break from the well-established panel structure of the imagetext subtly references the limitations of bio-graphic narrative (and by extension, traditional biographic narrative) in the representation of the lives of its subjects, particularly in terms of their deaths.

Most of all, though, the illusion functions in much the same ways as the aforementioned treatments of Riel's unsettling nature do: to establish the defacement of

Riel's identity as it is carried out by a society determined to reinforce rigid binaristic classifications to which the challenging hybrid figure Riel will not submit. It functions likewise as a summation of Brown's unique perspective on the contradictions and the complexities of his subject's life, as well as his use of the unique formalistic tropes of the comics form to express those contradictions in a manner that reflects back upon the binary-challenging nature of both his chosen art form and his chosen subject.

Throughout his career as a comics artist, Chester Brown has demonstrated a keen understanding of the ability of comics to unsettle readers, to challenge their binaristic assumptions concerning a variety of subjects. With this in mind, his decision to focus on the unsettling figure of Louis Riel would seem to follow from the themes, narratives, and representative interests visible in his past work. But Riel and the events surrounding him are also "un-settling," embodying rich possibilities for post-colonial analysis, as I shall explore in the next chapter.

Unsettling the Northwest: A Postcolonial Critique of *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*

In the last chapter, I examined how Chester Brown, a mercurial and confounding comics artist, embraces hybridity through his earlier comics work, disrupting, modifying and inverting generic, representative, and narrative conventions in productive ways. I also scrutinized Brown's *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, a complex bio-graphic narrative in which the artist represents his unsettling subject in ways that unwind the tangled knots of interpretation that surround Louis Riel, or at the very least trace its twisted strands of religion, madness, and identity. This engrossing graphic text registers the inherent contradictions that Riel embodied, engaging with the Métis leader's mercurial ability to consistently confound the rigid classifications of the dominant society, much as the book's author has done throughout his career. With these issues now relatively delineated, it would seem to make sense to turn to the much more daunting maze of political, ideological, and historical implications in which the Riel narrative is situated. Brown wanders through this maze in *Louis Riel*, sometimes contradicting and sometimes reaffirming the basal assumptions that form its foundation. To return to Homi Bhabha's words as quoted in the introduction, I will here consider *Louis Riel* in terms of its identity as a "mixed and split" hybrid text which constitutes the "revaluation of assumptions" at the center of the dominant narratives on which it is based.

The most dominant of these narratives is unquestionably that of colonialism, a prism through which it is virtually impossible not to view Riel and his conflicts with the Canadian government. Some initial disambiguation on the use of this term might be

necessary before proceeding, or perhaps I should rather call it *ambiguation*. The all-inclusive application of terms such as "imperialism" or "colonialism" to either the 1869/70 Red River Resistance or the 1885 Northwest Rebellion is not only controversial but essentially fallacious. Indeed, discussing post-Confederation Canada as an unequivocally colonial power is extremely problematic, if not entirely impossible; though nineteenth-century Canada may gaze with longing back at the imperial centre of Britain, the "powerful central government [...] in Ottawa" is the source of authority in Confederation (Swainson 71). As I asserted in the introduction, Canada can more accurately be situated in a space of colonial hybridity as a settler-colony, a position which unsettles the classic binary of colonizer vs. colonized and yet is inherently inscribed ("settled") by both poles of that arrangement. Any post-colonial readings of Riel and the conflicts in which he participated must therefore take this more ambiguously-contoured theoretical framework into account. The settler-invader model tends to place a greater focus on influence, discourse and symbolic constructions than the physical dominion over land, resources, and people by a centralized power that "pure" colonialism connotes, and is therefore a more generative perspective from which to articulate the effects of the peculiar colonial ideology at work in the hybridized world of *Louis Riel*.

I feel justified in this approach at least partly because several recent works on Riel – scholarly, biographical, or otherwise – consider their subject from a directly postcolonial perspective, albeit absent the vital ambiguity of the hybrid. Though Maggie Siggins decries representations of Riel that are "swathed in the constraint of political ideology" (448), she reveals a definite liberal-humanist bias by referring to "Anglo-Saxon

imperialism" and its "denigrat[ion]" of her biographical subject in the epilogue to *Riel: A Life of Revolution* (447). Thomas Flanagan, on the other hand, wrote *Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered*, a vehemently conservative denial of government complicity in Métis dispossession (indeed denying the validity of the idea that any dispossession even occurred) that seeks to refute the postcolonial reconsideration of Riel. In his book, Flanagan states that "Riel has become a portmanteau symbol for the fashionable causes of the political left, including national liberation, Canadian nationalism, human rights, aboriginal rights, multiculturalism, and bilingualism" (8). In his problematic quasi-history *From The Gallows: The Lost Testimony of Louis Riel*, David G. Doyle claims to be working towards "shaping the new post-colonial Canada" (182), mincing no words in laying the blame for Riel's fate on the forces of "racism, colonialism and cultural genocide" (184). Yet, like most postcolonial re-considerations of Riel, Doyle's conception of a "new post-colonial Canada" is based on antiquated notions of how imperialism and colonialism function that are not aligned with the country's historical and political circumstances as closely as settler-invader postcolonialism.

All of these writers come to Riel from distinct ideological trajectories, their representations "swathed [...] in political ideology" that is often as constraining as Siggins claims it to be, but often not. Brown is no exception; in a discussion of his artistic choices in *Louis Riel* (specifically his portrayal of Sir John A. Macdonald), he states that "I consider myself a right-winger" from a "tradition that believes in limiting the size of government – keeping it small. So anything that makes government look big

and inefficient or something that should be kept in control – that's good in my view" (Interview with Arnold). The libertarian overtones of this statement serve to contextualize the anti-authoritarian bent of Brown's early works somewhat, but there is a further context to these political beliefs to be considered, as is divulged in the notes to *The Little Man*. Brown writes, off-handedly but revealingly, "I'm embarrassed now [...] by having to admit that I was ever a nationalist" (162). This comment, initially made in the 1998 first edition of the short-strip collection in the midst of the early composing stages of the *Louis Riel* series, might well be seen as a logical expansion of Brown's disapproval of unfettered, centralized government to include Canadian nationalist-federalism, or it may have roots in other political views about which Brown has not yet elaborated. At any rate, the more important question to ask is: how are these aspects of Brown's political perspective most visible in his graphic text? The answer, I think, can be found in Brown's use of caricature.

Caricatured Characters: Sir John A. Macdonald and Thomas Scott

In *Celebrity Caricature in America*, Wendy Wick Reaves offers an acute definition of caricature and its ideological uses:

> The human condition, rather than the human figure, provided the subject matter for [caricatures]. Their function was not just to amuse but to criticize the foibles of society and to protest the abuses of political power. Artists probed beneath appearances to expose disreputable character traits.

> The distortions of the figure played a role, providing the parody of a well-known likeness or establishing a comic type for ridicule, but the actual portrait was secondary to the satiric message of the cartoon. (6)

Caricature, then, is a more ideologically-charged version of the cartoon, a sort of political "amplification through simplification" that accentuates certain physical features of political leaders as a way of speaking back to their power. Brown employs caricature in re-politicizing the universalized cartoon faces of his characters, especially those of historical figures. As he is surely aware that the political implications of the events in the Red River Valley in 1869-70 and in the Northwest in 1885 were at least partly disseminated to Eastern Canada through political cartoons (see Braz, images 2-7 in middle insert), he draws upon the previous iconographic history of Riel with his use of caricature.

The visual motif of caricature is applied in *Louis Riel* in the general manner described above by Reaves, "to protest the abuses of political power" of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's government. On occasion, a panel can take on the practical appearance of a self-contained political cartoon, such as the one in which William McDougall, having just been named Lieutenant-Governor of the Red River Settlement, stands in Ottawa and declares "I'm going to be the King of the North-west!," arrogantly oblivious of the difficulties that await him (12:5). But the clearest caricatures featured in the bio-graphic narrative are those of Macdonald, Riel's "nemesis" (Braz 13), and of Thomas Scott, his "cross to bear" (Siggins middle insert 1, page 4). They are also the most interesting in that the satirical targets of these caricatures are the disseminated effects of British imperialism on the conduct of the settler-colonial Canadian government in the West. The caricatures of Macdonald and Scott are the

visual focal points of Brown's critique of governmental (and, by extension, colonial) power in *Louis Riel*, a critique that colours the book's representation, its narrative, and its adaptation of history but begins quite simply: with a very large nose.

The bulbous, half-inflated-balloon nose that Brown gives Macdonald is indicative of the caricature technique signalled by Reaves, that of "prob[ing] beneath appearances to expose disreputable character traits," "the distortions of the figure" containing the seed of the "protest of the abuses of political power." From Macdonald's very first appearance (7:1-8:6, the first panel of the bio-graphic narrative), his nose is visually accentuated, a particularly conspicuous feature that sets him apart from other characters around him. Immediately, the reader makes simple but powerful associations via this accentuation, namely to Macdonald's reputation as a "dishonest manipulator" (Swainson 63) via the Pinocchio myth, and to his lifelong habit of "heavy drinking" (42), which is made explicit later in the narrative. Like the police in robbers' masks in *Ed the Happy Clown*, this protuberant nose is a loaded visual marker, the central ideological unit of the caricature of Macdonald.

The suggestion inherent to the picture is also borne out by his words. In his aforementioned first appearance, Macdonald negotiates Canada's purchase of Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company then immediately contrives to arrange the situation to benefit Anglocentric interests. He plans to appoint McDougall, an Orangeman, as lieutenant-governor at Red River in order to "discourage French settlers from heading west" (8:3) and wants to delay representative government in the region until "we've got a good white English majority in place" (8:4). What Brown achieves here is the discursive equivalent of his visual caricature of Macdonald. By having his version of Macdonald state simply and openly these imperial

plans, Brown amplifies his critique of Macdonald's (mis)use of government power through a caricature-like focused simplification of the Prime Minister's rhetoric.

This characterization – this *caricature* – of Canada's first Prime Minister as a scheming, duplicitous, ethnocentric drunk is drawn nowhere more clearly than in the sequence in which Macdonald hatches a Machiavellian scheme to foment a Métis rebellion in the Northwest in order to facilitate the building of the transnational railroad (133:3-137:2). It is a fascinating panel sequence in its construction and implications, as well as in its use of caricature and amplification through simplification. Macdonald is seated in a chair in a darkened room with what appears to be a spotlight focused on him; his hair is dishevelled, and he sips from a bottle while several empties lie scattered about the floor around him, referencing his historically-acknowledged alcohol problem (Swainson 42). He ruminates about his concurrent struggles with the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Métis in the Northwest, the onomatopoeic "glp, glp, glp" as he quaffs from the bottle set off as a counterpoint to his internal debate (133:4, 6, 134:2).

When Macdonald realizes that his political problems may contain the solutions to each other, the lights in his room turn on, a witty rehabilitation of the common visual cliché of the idea-lightbulb (134:5). He wakes CPR president George Stephen to tell him his plan, and Stephen pointedly (and humourously) asks him, "Have you been drinking again?" (136:2). Macdonald then lays out his idea to encourage the "Half-breeds" to rebel so that Canadian troops can be sent west on the CPR to "bring law and order to a remote part of the country" (136:5), thus drumming up the necessary popular and Parliamentary support to finance the railway's completion. Brown draws this last part of the sequence like a council of antagonists

in a Hollywood B-movie: Stephen is cast as the accomplice, holding his fingertips together in a nefarious pose (137:1-2) while Macdonald's large black shadow, the caricatured nose even more prominent than usual, looms ominously over the two men as they talk (136:3-137:2). The imagetext here seems to have a clear project, that of constructing Macdonald as a villainous figure in the bio-graphic narrative of Riel and therefore casting the actions of Macdonald's Canadian government (actions that are very much open to interpretation one way or the other) in a predominantly negative light. If the imagery of this sequence, and Stephen calling Macdonald a "devious bastard" (136:6), is not enough confirmation of Brown's intent in this direction, one need only turn to the endnotes on these panels for further support.

At the end of *Louis Riel*, Brown includes twenty-two pages of notes on his graphic text. These notes are pointedly separated from the bio-graphic narrative by three blank pages, and they generally serve to contextualize and expand that bio-graphic narrative. But the content of the notes often contradicts and undermines Brown's project as well, exposing his historical modifications and acts of narrative and representative streamlining. Most curiously, in a work so assiduously grounded in the fluid and ambiguous interactions between image and text, the notes can be seen to locate final representative authority in words alone, seeming to re-establish the aesthetic hegemony of text over image that comics, as a form, tends to throw into question. They therefore constitute a break-up of the imagetext, a problematic image/text sundering of the representational collaboration of words and pictures in *Louis Riel*. Brown's notes, however, are often indispensable in forming effective readings of his graphic text, and the notes on this particular episode of the bio-graphic narrative are illuminating to our consideration of the critique of settler-colonial power provided therein.

History in the Gutters

In his notes on the sequence discussed above, Brown admits that constructing Macdonald as a villain was its goal, because "villains are fun in a story" (259). This may initially seem to be quite a basic, innocuous statement on Brown's part, but reading on, one finds the villainous Macdonald to be part of a larger narrative project. Immediately after making the above statements, Brown equivocates, writing that "even though I think that Macdonald was capable of abusing his power, I don't think that he was actually a villain" before finally declaring "I'd rather live in a state run by John A. Macdonald than one run by Louis Riel" (259). Following from these words, it would be accurate to state that Macdonald *himself* is not, as such, the ideological target of *Louis Riel*; in truth, he is much more of an ideological *confrère* to Brown than even the bio-graphic subject. Rather, the apparatuses and discourses of settler-colonial power that Macdonald represents would seem to be the focus of the critique, as a further perusal of Brown's notes would tend to indicate.

Also discussed in the notes is the so-called "conspiracy theory"[1] that Macdonald hatches in the graphic text episode in question, "the notion that the 1885 rebellion happened by 'design'" in order to provide impetus for further CPR financing (258). Hinted at in Douglas Neil Sprague's *Canada and the Métis, 1869-1885* and expounded at length in Don McLean's

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[1]I employ the term "conspiracy" in reference to this idea with some trepidation, since it is a term often bandied about thoughtlessly in the interest of lightly dismissing genuine scholarly critiques of power by equating them with paranoid crackpot theorizing. Indeed, to the unschooled eye, colonialism itself might well seem like a "conspiracy theory." There is a razor distinction to be located between alleging a conspiracy, that is a premeditated, knowing and above all clandestine collusion of those in power working towards a common goal, and noting the (often quite public) shared ideological interests and projects of the agents of power, as colonialist scholars are wont to do. That said, as the "conspiracy" narrativized by Brown is quite clearly aligned with the former delineation (though it contains instances of the latter as well), the term will be allowed to

generally derided "polemic in the guise of scholarship" (Crowley 598) *1885: Métis Rebellion or Government Conspiracy?*, this "conspiracy" has "little in the way of hard evidence" to support it, as Brown acknowledges (258). But the theory is nonetheless rich in circumstantial possibility, and fits into a sort of oversimplified postcolonial profiling of manipulative imperial interests with inviting snugness. Indeed, Brown confesses that he employs this "conspiracy" in his graphic text mainly "because it makes Macdonald seem more villainous," but the aim seems to me to turn the focus onto how "people in positions of prominence frequently abuse their power" (259), with Macdonald as a sort of case study. In this way, the CPR-Rebellion conspiracy theory operates in narrative terms in much the same way as Brown's caricature of Macdonald operates in visual terms, amplifying certain political implications of the narrative of Riel by expressing them in simplified (and decidedly non-historical) terms.

There is certainly more to be said about Brown's narrative use of the conspiracy plot and its symbolic valences in the *Louis Riel* imagetext, but it strikes me as necessary to keep my focus on caricature for the time being and consider Brown's treatment of another historical figure traditionally aligned against Riel: Thomas Scott. Scott, an Ontarian with links to the Orange Order who was court-martialed for treason and executed by the Métis provisional government in Red River in 1870, is a difficult figure to negotiate in narratives revolving around Riel. Siggins, never anything but uncomplimentary to anyone in opposition to her biographical subject, finds Scott "particularly irascible" (84) and "arrogant" (123; Siggins' favoured epithet for Riel's opponents), noting that, after his death, "Scott became an instant symbol – the up-standing, courageous young British loyalist toiling to civilize the West on

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stand.

behalf of the Canadian people, cut down in his youth by savages" (164). It is Scott-as-symbol, thus invested with the full import of settler-colonialist ideology, in particular its "narratives of arrival, hardship, and settlement" that are "integral to [the] self-definition" of settler subjects (Johnston and Lawson 361). As he does with Macdonald, Brown engages Scott and his symbolic significance through the use of caricature.

Brown focuses on Scott as a cartoon analogue for larger cultural forces acting upon the events of his bio-graphic narrative, namely the Canadians of British-Protestant stock who tended to marginalize Riel and the "Half-breeds" as an inferior "race" and worked against their interests (Siggins finds such "arrogant" figures at every turn, it seems). But given a closer examination of Brown's caricatured treatment of Scott, the large-nosed, cartoon-villain Macdonald appears to have received very favourable treatment in comparison. Brown's Scott is an extremely unattractive character in both appearance and comportment; he is drawn with disproportionately long face and thin neck, his jaw square with tufts of facial hair on his jowls. In close-up (as in 63:1), his appearance is unpleasing, frightful; inhuman, even. This representative choice is in stark contrast to the historical Scott, whose features bore little or no resemblance to this caricature. Even a cursory glance at a photograph of Scott (Siggins provides one; middle insert 1, page 4) demonstrates that Scott was indeed quite handsome, which is how he is represented in Zoran and Toufik's *Louis Riel: Le père du Manitoba* (19). For Brown, however, Scott's physical appearance seems to be a visual metaphor for both his behaviour and his settler-colonialist ideology, both of which Brown treats as analogously ugly.

The introduction of Scott sets an immediate tone for Brown's representation of him in the imagetext. Scott is first seen wielding a blood-soaked axe and viciously assaulting Norbert

Parisien, a Métis who had escaped from imprisonment by the Canadian partisans in Red River and mistakenly shot an Anglophone settler, Hugh Sutherland (54:5-55:5). Brown's notes once again amend his representative choices, as he allows that his depiction "probably exaggerates Scott's viciousness [...] the way I've written the scene virtually implies that Scott alone killed Parisien, and in reality it's likely that the murder was more of a group effort" (248-49), which is how it is depicted by Zoran and Toufik (18). Indeed, there's nothing "virtual" about Scott's sole complicity in the act in Brown's text: Scott is splattered with Parisien's blood as he hysterically insists to be allowed to continue his assault (54:6), and his ally Doc Schultz ends the scene by stating matter-of-factly, "Okay Scott, you can stop now – you've killed him!" (55:5). Scott enters the bio-graphic narrative as a murderer, and once he is taken prisoner by the Métis at Fort Garry, his profile hardly improves.

In one of the oddest sequences in his book, Brown depicts what Siggins calls "the obscene insults, full of racist hatred, that [Scott] let fly day and night" while held prisoner (160), running on for several pages to fully establish their excessive nature (61:2-4, 62:2-65:1, 67:1-68:3). Except Brown does not actually provide Scott's verbal insults, choosing to represent them instead with a series of Xes, explained as meant to "indicate racist comments and profanity" (61:2). This choice seems to smack of self-censorship at first glance, a possible nod to mainstream conformity from the one-time *enfant terrible* author of the uncompromising "underground" comics *Ed the Happy Clown* and *The Playboy*. In contrast, both Robert Freynet and Zoran and Toufik allow his words to stand in their comparatively thin French-language graphic texts (Freynet 31; Zoran and Toufik 19), although the youth-oriented comics use much milder language than the unspeakable language implied by Brown's Xes. What it seems to be

doing on further reflection, however, is creating an interesting, hybrid image-textual effect, essentially stripping Scott's racist profanity of its linguistic valence. Brown appears to deny Scott's bigoted Anglocentrism any of the rhetorical weight of written language while he also refuses to grant it the persuasive power of the image, representing its expression as the comics equivalent of white noise.

What is achieved by this un-representation is a disruption of what Bhabha would call "the visibility of the colonial presence," which "makes the recognition of its authority problematic" (159). Bhabha writes that, "to be authoritative, [colonial power's] rules of recognition must reflect consensual knowledge or opinion; to be powerful these rules of recognition must be reached in order to represent the exorbitant objects of discrimination that lie beyond its purview" (159). It is not only Scott's racist comments that are being replaced by Xes, but the discriminatory basis for the Canadian settler-state's colonial ascendance over the Métis Other as well (an ascendance that is always already infirm in the settler-colony context). By removing the intolerant language of the Anglo-colonialist representative Scott from the realm of image-text discourse and moving it into an endlessly interpretable hybrid space, Brown exposes the racist rhetoric supporting the settler project as a superficial (yet very potent) stereotype, a revaluation of the assumption of imperial superiority to the indigenous Other that Bhabha finds to be so central to the establishment and maintenance of colonial power.

In addition, Brown provides the Métis a moment of retaliation through language, an interesting image/text resistance to the discriminatory effects of colonial discourse. As the exasperated Métis guards finally resort to physical violence in response to Scott's continued racist belligerence, still represented (or un-represented) by Xes, one of them calls the prisoner a

"Damned square-head!" (65:1). Contrasted with Scott's Xed-out profanity, this derogatory term should, by all rights, receive the same representative treatment as Scott's invective towards the "half-breeds," were Brown's approach to such rhetoric entirely consistent. And yet it is allowed to stand as a repartee to the excessive (but technically un-represented) anti-Métis vitriol employed by Scott, a verbal act of resistance to the discriminatory discourse of the settler subject in what we can only assume is correspondent language. The rhetorical playing-field is hardly level here (and Stephen Slemon has cautioned us concerning the problematic nature of resistance to colonial power, and the slur is written in the imperial *lingua franca*, English), but Brown allowing the ethnic defamation of the agent of settler-colonialism while erasing that agent's ethnic defamation of the Other follows from the manner in which his graphic text has thus far been providing a critique of Scott and the forces he represents.

Brown's representation of Scott is not nearly as monochrome as the above analysis might indicate, however. A deeper, cannier reading of this troublesome figure is visible in Brown's treatment of Scott's execution, a reading that, before facing analysis, might benefit from a bit of comparative context. Perhaps a more artful and shrewd vision of Scott than the version Brown provides (at least up until the Orangeman's death) can be found in Margaret Sweatman's *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, a remarkable and poetic historical novel focused around several generations of one family living in the environs of Winnipeg. The opening part of the novel deals with the titular Alice and Peter, the parents of Sweatman's narrator, Blondie, who is born in the Red River settlement in 1870. They become involved with Riel and the Métis in their resistance, and Alice, while disguised as a man (feigning maleness at times of conflict becomes a hereditary habit for the women of the family) and

pregnant with her daughter, witnesses Norbert Parisien's beating by (mainly) Scott (34-36).

Sweatman's depiction of Scott's personality and comportment is, like Brown's, profoundly negative, or at least her characters' views of him tends toward the negative. Blondie describes Scott as being "afraid of nearly everything," and "addicted to alcohol and rage"; Sweatman matches Brown's unpleasing caricature of Scott with an exquisitely distasteful description of her own, writing of Scott laughing "with his mouth full of raw smoked fat, emitting an odour of wood and whisky and the first sulphurous indications of dysentery" (37). Alice, posing as a male Métis guard in Fort Garry while Scott is held there and subject to the racist taunts "bleeped" out by Brown, "wanted to hurt him badly" and "longed for his death" (39). At the same time, Sweatman is keenly aware of the constructedness of this view of Scott, of the manner in which external anxieties are mapped onto him, much as Braz sees such anxieties being mapped onto Riel (204). Of her mother's hatred of Scott, Blondie states, "Mum configured Thomas Scott as the source of evil and danger to her unborn, and with logic understandable only to a pregnant, slighted woman disguised as a soldier in a drafty fort, she wanted to kill Thomas Scott and remove him from an otherwise blameless world" (38). Even this historically-fictive contemporary cannot refrain from "configuring" Scott in a symbolic manner.

Whether a symbolic construct or not, Alice's hatred for Scott finally finds an outlet for fulfillment when she is part of the firing squad that executes the prisoner, allowing her to play out her dark fantasy as "she fired into the sobbing chest of Thomas Scott" (41). Yet, vitally, Alice feels neither relief nor satisfaction as Scott lies dying: "a moan, deeply uttered, of no voice, of all voices, reached my mother like repentance, like eternal purgatory," and she is left

with no triumph, only "the burden of her guilt" (41). Sweatman then does something very interesting: she turns Scott, Riel's cross to bear, into Alice's (and her unborn child Blondie's) cross to bear as well; a spectral, haunting figure who "would carry himself within the song of all voices, an unfathomable chorus of human voices, beyond justice, beyond blame" (42). This haunting is powerfully symbolized by the "broken spirit" of Scott that "rose from the river" soon after Blondie's birth and "tattooed" the newborn with a "bright red" birthmark on her chest (51). Scott continues to haunt Blondie's family through the rest of Sweatman's sweeping multi-decade narrative – "Thomas Scott lived with us, so to speak, in the dark corners [...] a deranged boarder," as Blondie puts it (55) – but the subsequent apparitions follow the established pattern of the first. The "ghost of Thomas Scott" is a more important figure in Sweatman's novel than Riel is, and his haunting of her characters is a metaphor for one of the book's central themes, namely that of the long-gestating tug-of-war between the faded British imperial tradition and the emerging multi-cultural social reality for the soul of Canada's settler-society.

In comparison, Brown's depiction of Scott's final moments is much simpler, but no less resonant, in its uniquely image-textual way. Scott's execution by the Métis firing squad follows an excruciatingly drawn-out build-up lasting three pages (69:5-72:3), the dialogue minimal and the settings stark, establishing an unrelenting tension demanding release. When that release comes and Scott is fired upon, however, Brown gives us a panel that is entirely white, a total blank (72:4), though it is still clearly demarcated as a panel, unlike the missing frame that follows Riel's hanging at narrative's end. Like the blank panel during Riel's trial cited in the last chapter, this is a artificial gutter, a destabilizing hybrid space of deliberate

authorial construction. Compared to the earlier example, however, its implications are much more extreme and unflinching.

McCloud states that "to kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths" (*Understanding Comics* 69), calling upon the reader's imagination (and personal engagement) to fill in the representative blank, and that is precisely what the reader of Brown's bio-graphic text is asked to do at this juncture. Brown does not leave the death entirely to the reader, however; the panels that follow the blank one show Scott bleeding and moaning on the ground (72:5-6), until a man with a revolver arrives (73:1-3) to deliver what Riel himself later calls the "coup-de-grâce" (111:2). This is an interesting instance in terms of the bio-graphic narrative; even though Riel is not present, Scott's execution is one of the central moments of his life. Thus, Scott is killed a thousand times in the blank panel, much as his death has been rehashed a thousand times by historians and artists probing for its significance (Bumsted, *Thomas Scott's Body* 197). Brown is well aware of this constant reconstructing of Scott's death (Interview with Epp), and as in Sweatman's novel, the ghost of Thomas Scott seems to haunt the "dark corners" of his blank panel.

Brown's unique representation of this momentous event can be further contextualized in relation to its representation in the two main Francophone comics on Riel's life. Robert Freynet, for instance, shows Scott being shot by the firing squad (who are never visible in Brown's text) on the left side of the panel while Riel grips the right edge of the same panel in what we are led to assume is related anguish. This arrangement is a clear visual implication of Riel in Scott's death, yet Freynet provides a narration block

explaining away Riel's guilt in the affair (31:3). In Zoran and Toufik's relatively juvenile narrative, on the other hand, Riel tells the belligerent prisoner Scott, "Nous verrons qui est le maître ici, Scott. Nous verrons" (19:10), blatantly establishing the reasoning for the execution as a reaffirmation of the legitimacy of the Métis provisional government's power (Siggins 163), a motivation which Brown's text merely hints at (68:1-3). The execution itself (Zoran and Toufik 20:4-7) is not directly represented as in Brown's imagetext, but the firing squad's guns are shown blazing with a splashy onomatopoeic "PAW!" for good measure, an aesthetic choice that pushes the panels towards sensationalism (20:6). Furthermore, Zoran and Toufik include the so-called "coup-de-grâce" with a revolver, but without Brown's inexorable multi-panel build-up, the moment comes off as perfunctory, devoid of affect or reader implication.

In his own representation of the moment, Brown deftly employs the reader's impetus to closure, leaving the execution unrepresented and allowing it to linger and "haunt" both his reader's imagination and his imagetext, but he also exercises his biographer's prerogative, representing the final brutal stroke himself. This final stroke is aimed at the symbolic infrastructure that Scott symbolizes as well as its settler-state government in Ottawa, one that the limited-government advocate Brown wishes to construct as both over-reaching and inefficient through the use of caricature and of closure in his imagetext. But Scott is also associated with the CPR-Rebellion conspiracy plot device through the powerful image of the transcontinental railroad.

Trains and Chains: Drawing Colonial Space

Though Brown makes no mention of the fact in either his graphic text or his notes, Scott was only in Red River to work on the construction of the Dawson Road (Bumsted, *Louis Riel v. Canada* 103), a road from Thunder Bay to Fort Garry (Siggins 84-85) that presaged the building of the railroad and the subsequent "opening up" of the Canadian West to white settlement. Though this association goes unuttered in *Louis Riel*, the role played by the railroad in the service of settler-colonialism, "the idea of 'settlement' as *laying a claim*" on "disputed land" (Johnston and Lawson 361), is amplified by the interweaving of the CPR-Rebellion conspiracy into the historically-fictive bio-graphic narrative Brown constructs in his book.

This amplification is possible largely because, whatever its historical merits, the CPR-Rebellion conspiracy comprises many of the prominent symbolic themes of Riel's conflicts with the government, which Brown sharpens throughout his imagetext. The central idea expressed by the conspiracy story, in the simplest terms, is of a hardy but naive indigenous people being hoodwinked out of their land by a dastardly, ambitious politician in the interest of nation-building and technological advancement. This conception is built on the stark Old World vs. New World dichotomy that is the starting point for most postcolonial criticism, and extends to Riel himself, who Braz contends is often seen as "a symbol of the pastoral world that seems destined to give way to the new industrial universe" (17). Again, this is vastly oversimplified in many ways, not the least of which is the difficulty of confidently slotting the Métis into the tropes of either the

colonized or colonizer (a disjunction Brown also seems to recognize, as we will see in a moment), to say nothing of the complex nature of colonialism in Second-World settler-colony Canada.

A good deal of the symbolic potency of the conspiracy plot stems from the central role that the construction of the transcontinental railroad played in the colonial project. The grand myth of the railroad is one of progress, of opening up the land to white settlement, but inevitably this "opening up" also meant "closing off" the land with property rights and partitioning of space, re-definitions that could not help but benefit property-owning settlers over indigenous peoples. The harsh colonialist-capitalist reality behind the nationalist myth-weaving is expressed most elegantly by Howard O'Hagan at the opening of his novel *Tay John*. O'Hagan nimbly overturns the common trope of the railroad project as the fledgling nation's founding exploit, stating inversely that "so that [the railroad] might be built and that men might gain money from its building, Canada was made a dominion" (11). Brown's imagetext negotiates both the mythic and the critical viewpoints concerning the laying of the iron road from sea to sea. Aside from the narrative collusion of corporate and settler-state interests explored above, there are several other instances worth noting which cleverly inscribe both the role of the railroad and of the re-definition of space in the settler-colonial project and extend the underlying themes discussed earlier.

The trains that appear in *Louis Riel* are almost always situated in transitional (one might call them liminal) panels, visual markers for movement from one setting to another. But more than that, Brown's trains connect the civilization to the wilderness,

and vice versa; this was, obviously, the role of the *real* railroad, but there is an added symbolic dimension to this transitional role in *Louis Riel*. The railroad is first used to transport William McDougall to Red River, represented by a wide shot of a locomotive steaming through a wilderness scene (12:6). When McDougall returns to Ottawa in defeat after the surrender of the forces openly opposing Riel's provisional government, he is shown seated in frustration inside a railcar (31:6). The imagery of the panel that brings the prospective lieutenant-governor into the narrative, explicitly that of the technology of the colonizers mastering the untamed spaces of colonized lands, is thus cleverly reversed in the panel that takes him away from it: the agent of Anglo-Canadian settler-culture, foiled in his attempt to undermine the hybridized Riel and the Métis, is now imprisoned and isolated by the technology that formerly enabled his mission.

The image of a train steaming through the wilderness is repeated several times (75:3, 77:2), but an even more explicit exemplification of the railroad's role in the settler-colonial project than the McDougall panels comes later, in an epic panel sequence that eloquently completes the conspiratorial promise of Macdonald's CPR-Rebellion plot. At the scheming Prime Minister's dogged insistence (168:2), the Canadian troops sent West in response to the Métis unrest travel on the CPR, the train advancing panel-by-panel through Brown's wide-open, painterly landscapes (168:6-169:2). The settler-state's army then issues from the stopped train into an empty snowscape (169:3) before moving on foot through the wilderness, the agents of the settler order penetrating a forbidding indigenous forest (169:4). By their very presence, these settler-soldiers lay an implicit claim on the land, and the railroad is the symbolic and the actual instrument of that

possession.

Freynet makes a similar implication in a creative but distinct manner in his biographic narrative; early in the narrative, he portrays an incident from his subject's youth in which Riel, on route to school in Montreal, sees a steam-train for the first time and describes it as a "monstre noir, effrayant, crachant fumée et vapeur," Freynet's shaded illustration vividly reflecting this frightened reaction (7:2). Having already constructed the railroad (and by extension the colonial progress it represents) in such terrifying terms, Freynet later mentions that the army sent to counter the fomenting rebellion in 1885 travels "via le nouveau chemin de fer canadien" (49:2), linking the two projects much more subtly than Brown does with his CPR-Rebellion plot. There is a further ambiguity to the railroad imagery in Freynet's imagetext, since the "monstre noir" transports not only the Canadian army into the west, but the young Riel into the east, much as it takes Father Ritchot to and from Ottawa to negotiate the terms of the Manitoba Act in *Louis Riel* (75:3, 77:1-2). The liminal railroad is therefore an apt image-textual symbol for the "complicated politics of representation" of settler-culture (Johnston and Lawson 363), for its hybridized position and its mixed and split inscriptions.

Much more interesting to observe in Brown's imagetext, and also much more problematic, is the issue of space. The idea of space is always vital to postcolonial critiques, as Bhabha's examination of colonial space and hybrid sites proves out, not to mention the post-structural approach of Michel Foucault, who writes that "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" ("Of Other Spaces" 22). Considering the problem of space from both of these perspectives, two distinct angles of

approach can be discerned in Brown's imagetext. There is Brown's broaching of the mapping of space by colonial powers, and then there is the representation of Métis land as "empty" space in the visual discourse of the settlers. Though Brown works intelligently with the former definitions of space, he displays less awareness in his application of the latter forms, which, even taking into account his more strident imagetextual critiques of Canada's settler government as identified above, comes across as a mere reiteration of discriminatory colonialist rhetoric.

In *Imagined Communities*, his seminal study of worldwide nationalism, Benedict Anderson tells us that "European-style maps worked on the basis of a totalizing classification" and, since map-making became a much more mathematically-precise practice in the late eighteenth century, "the entire planet's curved surface had been subjected to a geometrical grid which squared off empty seas and unexplored regions in measured boxes" (173). "The second half of the nineteenth century," Anderson continues, "was the golden age of [colonial] surveyors [...], triangulation by triangulation, war by war, treaty by treaty, the alignment of map and power proceeded" (173). He then buttresses his observations of this "alignment of map and power" by quoting Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul, who writes that, in the case of colonial charting, "a map anticipated spatial reality, not vice versa" (qtd. in Anderson 173). Though Anderson and Thongchai both refer to mapping exercises in Southeast Asia, specifically in Siam (Anderson 173), their statements are true of North America as well, and particularly (in the scope of this work at least) of the Canadian West.

The root causes of the Red River Resistance and the 1885 Rebellion in the

Northwest were undoubtedly numerous and complex, but Brown once again amplifies their inherent political-spatial implications through simplifying. In the bio-graphic narrative, each conflict is sparked by the arrival of Canadian government surveyors on Métis lands (9:6-10:5, 121:1-2); in fact, the composition of the initial panel of both encounters (9:6, 121:1) is almost exactly identical, a keen visual link between the events thus established. The case of the 1869 survey is one of a map anticipating spatial reality, to paraphrase Thongchai. Macdonald sends out a survey team in advance of Canada's legal possession of Rupert's Land, anticipating that possession as well as the pre-emptive *dis*possession of the Métis, themselves products of the settler-colonial project, neither colonial or indigenous. Therefore the Métis resistance is problematized and hybridized, "necessarily doubled, necessarily mediated, in [its] social location" as all colonial acts of resistance tend to be (Slemon 37). While Riel and the Métis defy the larger colonial project that Anderson calls "the alignment of map and power," they are only able to do so in the terms of that alignment, as an examination of Brown's imagetext will demonstrate.

The most famous image of the Métis resistance, and perhaps the defining tableau of Riel's life itself, is that of the Métis leader defiantly stepping on the surveyors' chain. It appears in Freynet's graphic text (23:4), where it even graces the book's cover, and Zoran and Toufik portray a variant of the same image in their narrative, drawing Riel's horse stamping before the survey team and knocking over their equipment in an "action comics" style of panel (12:5). The image also materializes in a more self-conscious way in Lenny Everson's *Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont: A Short Play*, an insubstantial but interesting minor work built largely around Everson's unpublished poetry about the two

figures (Foreword).

Most involving as a negotiation of the personas of the play's two titular figures (a negotiation which Brown's text also reflects, as I will consider later in the chapter), Everson's text nonetheless also tinkers with the potent imagery around the conflicts. At one point, Dumont says, "Hey Louis – show them how you handled the surveyors," and the two men self-consciously re-enact the aforementioned tableau of Riel defiantly standing "like a rock, my right foot on the survey chain" (4). The staged nature of the tableau provided by Everson hints slyly at the fact that, despite the pervasiveness of the imagery, there is little historical basis to support the iconic visual of Riel actually stepping on the surveyors' chain during the confrontation. Siggins writes that one of Riel's fellow Métis resisters stepped on the chain (97), while Brown, unlike his Francophone counterparts, does not employ the image at all and adds in his notes, "during the confrontation, the Métis, or at least some of them, dismounted and stepped on the surveyors' chain" (246). The most powerful image of the resistance is not merely unsettled but removed entirely from Brown's imagetext.

Instead, in an instance of visual hybridity, Brown employs an actual map to establish the will to "totalizing classification" at the heart of the colonial definition of space as well as the implication of the Métis' resistance in that definition. After the encounter with a survey team that opens Part Three of *Louis Riel*, Dumont and other prominent Métis examine a map of the settlement along the South Saskatchewan River, one of the men explaining how the survey had divided the lots (121:6-122:2). A close-up panel of the map follows, showing the long rectangular river-lots along the South

Saskatchewan, the land-lot system preferred by the Métis (122:3). In the next panel, though, the river-lots begin to be replaced on the map with square lots – "the English way" of dividing the land; indeed, the French-style river-lots seem to transform into English-style square-lots on the page (122:4).

The map, itself a separate kind of imagetext *inside* the larger imagetext, therefore encodes the encroachment of the imperial system cartographically. It takes the form of a literal "squaring off" in a doubled, hybrid way, both in the conflict and the negotiation between colonizer and colonized visualized by the two lot types on the map and in the general tendency to "square off" the known and unknown world into a "geometrical grid" in the imperial interest of "totalizing classification," as pointed out by Benedict Anderson. However, as has been previously mentioned, aligning the Métis unambiguously with the colonial binary of the colonized indigene is a highly problematic identification, which this lot-survey episode illustrates quite clearly. The lot system preferred by the Métis, aligned against the British imperial lot system favored by the Canadian settler order though it may be, is not indigenous but rather is *another* imperial system, namely that of the French. Though the Métis resistance may contain major elements of an indigenous movement, it is at all times inscribed with the processes of imperial settler-colonialism, and Brown encodes that implication image-textually in this sequence.

From Brown's treatment of firmly defined, mapped space, we now turn to the more fraught symbolic imaginings of space in *Louis Riel*. In the last chapter, I made mention of Brown's visual technique in *The Playboy* and *I Never Liked You* of

defamiliarizing mundane suburban scenes by drawing them as panoramic landscapes that dwarfed his characters. This visual motif takes on new valences and further strength in *Louis Riel*, most of which takes place in the vast, wild, often snow-swept regions of the Canadian West. The motif is applied so consistently in the graphic text that any representative citation of exemplary panels would become excessive; even a casual reader could flip through any series of pages at random and come across one or more panels dominated by their panoramic backgrounds. Still, this oppressive feeling of endless space achieves striking effect (and affect) in a few notable instances, such as the rain-drenched expanse that surrounds Riel as he abandons Fort Garry in advance of the arrival of the expeditionary force from Ottawa (85:3-6) or the open vistas that provide an epic setting for the armed skirmishes between the Métis and government forces in 1885 (149:3-150:1, 158:1-4, 172:3-6).

Yet these representations of limitless uninhabited space against which human settlers are made to seem minuscule do have an ideological – and colonial – slant as well, accurate reflections of the historical geographical reality of the pre-settlement West though they may be. In my introduction, I cited Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson's article "Settler Colonies" in respect to the desire of the settler subjects (the representative of whom I would take to be the Anglo-Canadian author Chester Brown, in this case) to support their own claims to cultural authenticity by managing "the displacement of indigenous peoples" in "the symbolic domain" (365). Agents of Second-World settler culture, Johnston and Lawson contend, "refered to themselves and their culture as indigenous" in the interest of "cement[ing] their legitimacy, their own increasingly secure

sense of moral, spiritual, and cultural belonging in the place they commonly (and revealingly) described as 'new'" (363).

Part and parcel of this naturalizing process is how settlers "began to tell stories and devise images that emphasized the disappearance of native peoples" (363). One of the most pervasive of these settler narratives, and one of the most effective in achieving the goal of legitimization by "put[ting] the settler in the cultural and discursive place of the indigene whose physical space has already been invaded," is commonly called "*Terra Nullius*" ("nobody's land"), after a term used in an Australian case (since overturned) that legally established pre-colonization lands as "empty" (364). In the settler discourse of "empty land," Johnston and Lawson tell us that

> Whenever possible, the vastness of the land was emphasized and this was often a prelude to or accompanied by an even more strategic emphasis on its 'emptiness.' [...] Vast and empty lands, insistently recorded in both texts and visual images, called out, obviously, to the European imagination to be filled, and they were filled by, successively, people, crops, and herds, but also by the stories and histories that [...] legitimated the settlement [...]. These tropes are persistent devices, thoroughly installed in cultural metaphysics and discourses, of clearance and removal, and of effacement. (364-65)

In visual terms, these tropes function in much the same way as landscape descriptions in the writings of early fur traders do, as I.S. MacLaren notes: these advance agents of imperial commercialism (some of them ancestors of the Métis) "render[ed]

terrain into psychologically comforting landscapes by invoking the aesthetics of [...] landscape appreciation" in an attempt to "consecrate wilderness terrain as somehow visually British" (567), while also establishing that terrain as "empty" and ripe for settlement. Brown's picturesque depictions of "vast and empty lands" can be equated with this prototypical settler discourse, but there is a doubly-inscribed effacement going on in *Louis Riel*.

The Métis: A Hybrid People

Not only are the lands being symbolically "emptied" by Brown's landscape imagery, but his bio-graphic narrative of Riel (which is personally but not politically sympathetic, as we have seen) itself feeds off of the repetition of the story of the Métis' "departed hero" Riel (Friesen 108) as a similar discourse of effacement and de-legitimization. There is an impression in the post-1885 discourse around Riel and the Métis, witheringly (though perhaps unwittingly) expressed by Thomas Flanagan, that by following Riel into a "hopeless, violent rebellion" (*Louis "David" Riel* 204) based on "historically fictional" grievances (*Riel and the Rebellion* 189), the Métis in effect "disappeared" from the social landscape by giving up their claims to the land, thus opening up that landscape (physical and discursive) to white settlement in their stead. The Métis were not wholly guiltless in this process either, at least according to Jennifer S.H. Brown, who claims that after the 1885 Rebellion "countless Métis indeed made themselves as invisible as they could after the troubles," choosing to "pass" as either

white or Native rather than assert their specific cultural identity as their descendants have increasingly done (20). Although the Métis community remains a modest but vital fixture in the Canadian cultural mosaic, as publications like John W. Friesen's *The Riel/Real Story* and David G. Doyle's *From the Gallows: The Lost Testimony of Louis Riel* argue convincingly (if a bit clumsily), the symbolic displacement of the Métis by settler narratives is largely a *fait-accompli*, thanks in no small part to the circulation of the life-narrative of that ever-polarizing figure, Louis Riel.

After analyzing the myriad ways in which Chester Brown represents Riel's inherent complexity and critiques the vagaries of the Canadian government and its imposition of the settler order in Red River and the Northwest, it might strike one as strange that the same iconoclastic author would fall to recirculating the discriminatory assumptions and the discourse of effacement of his settler culture concerning the Métis people. Yet, despite Brown's artistic and professional history of breaking down binaristic assumptions and defying easy categorization, his approach to the Métis (and to indigenous peoples in general) in *Louis Riel* smacks of totalised, either-or binarism. This inclination seems to follow from a revealing (and no doubt controversial) assertion concerning Native peoples that he makes in an interview about his book. Brown is discussing the "Native problem" in Canada, the source of which he calls the "fundamental differences" between the European and Native views *vis-à-vis* property rights. He seems to view the choice for the First Nations as being between poverty or assimilation: "They aren't going to be able to keep their culture *and* enjoy the kind of economic growth that we see in the rest of the US and Canada. They can't have both –

it's one or the other" (Interview with Epp). Viewed from the ambit of settler-invader theory, Brown seems intent on erasing the ambiguity of cultural identification that Johnston and Lawson argue is inherent to the settler culture; in the case of contemporary Canadian First Nations at least, it must be one (indigenous culture) or the other (settler-culture assimilation).

This revealing remark sheds some light on Brown's representative treatment of the Métis in *Louis Riel*, which could generously be termed as "simplified." Given the complex theoretical emplacements of the Métis in a settler-cultural framework, Brown can perhaps be forgiven (to some extent) for desiring a more clear-cut classification. In one way, the Métis fit the identificatory rubric of the settler colony snugly: like the white settler subject, they are doubly inscribed, "occupying a place caught between two First Worlds, two origins of authority and authenticity" (Johnston and Lawson 370). Yet the Métis are square pegs in the round hole of settler culture, perhaps because while the interpellation of the settler subject by the "two origins of authority and authenticity" is, in effect, external, for the Métis, it is *internal*. Their very name, from the French for "mixed," enshrines a hybridized cultural identity, as does their symbolic homeland of Red River which "in its genesis and history was most critical to the coalescence of a collective and conspicuous métis political and cultural identity" (Peterson and Brown 10). The colony is poised liminally (at the historical moment of the 1869/70 resistance at least) between the broadly binaristic locations of "civilization" (Ontario and Quebec) and "the wilderness" (the Northwest) as a sort of heterotopic space. If anything, in the case of the Métis' hybrid position, the double inscription of the settler culture is more immediate,

and "the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity" that Bhabha sees as the central role of hybridity seems to play out even more actively in the constant negotiation of Métis cultural identity.

But it is perhaps this constant transgressing of colonial binaries, this inherent inability of the Métis to "pick a side" of the rigid identitarian divide, that is the root of their unsettling position in the settler-colonial context, particularly in the case of their nineteenth-century resistances in the Canadian West. Though, as Jennifer Brown tells us, "the Métis by their existence challenge [...] scholarly dichotomies," they are also, to many observers, "doubly mysterious, the most 'Other' of all" (22). This was especially the case in the more xenophobic nineteenth-century colonial society of Canada, where Margaret Lukens points out that "such a representation of the half-blood as embodying the worst of both worlds was common" (413). This "common representation" is reflected in Chester Brown's imagetext by the Anglo-Canadian characters' repeated use of the pejorative "French savages" to describe the Métis (14:3, 153:2), a term that conflates both of the internal Others – French-Canadians and First Nations – from the British imperial perspective into one. A certain inbred racism and a keen sense of imperial superiority unquestionably colored this Anglo-Canadian disdain for the Métis in the 1800s and beyond, not to mention the settler-subject's driving desire to possess (and thus settle) the lands already claimed by the Métis. Still, there is perhaps also an anxiety directed at the threat the Métis' hybrid identity poses to the Second-World settler identity to take into account.

"Racial dualism seems deeply embedded in Anglo-American thought," Jennifer

Brown argues (21), an outgrowth, perhaps, of the aforementioned ascendance of the sharply dichotomous classifications of structuralism, Foucault's "age-old distinction between the Same and the Other" quoted earlier. Nineteenth-century intellectual opinion held that hybridity was not an acceptable option, certainly not in terms of racial or cultural identity but not in more general terms either. Thus, "the Métis are persistently defined mainly with reference to others, as derivative, the sum of their diverse parts rather than an original creation" (Jennifer Brown 24). "Half-breed," the common English name for the Métis in the late-nineteenth century and beyond, was indeed part and parcel of this persistent definition, both referring contemptuously to a heritage of miscegenation and labelling the Métis as "half-people," their mixed blood placing them below the "pure-blood" imperial citizen in the racial hierarchy. This denial of a hybrid position for the Métis reflects not only a general Euro-imperial anxiety about miscegenation and the attendant possibility of racial "passing," but becomes particularly resonant when considered in terms of the construction of settler identity.

If, as we have seen, the settler subject's position is defined both by a constant negotiation of the imperial and the indigenous poles of identity and authenticity and by the circulation of discourse that distances the imperial claims and effaces the indigenous ones, then the Métis would appear particularly unsettling (and un-settling) to the subject. The Métis embrace of an identity incorporating *both* origins of authenticity in order to forge a unique emplacement, both a mirror image of "the self and its doubling" as Bhabha defines hybridity (162) and a wholly "nouveau peuple" as Riel himself calls them (*Poetry* 319), poses a threat to the settler subject's strategic and symbolic sense of self.

The Métis are thus unsettling to the terms of the settler's cultural definition as well as "un-settling" to the processes of the colonial project through their inherent racial and cultural hybridity, the unspeakable but undeniable fact of which, to repeat Bhabha's formulation from the introduction, turns "the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification," constituting "a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority" in the colonial milieu (162). Therefore, just as the religious enthusiasm of their famed leader Riel caused him to be remanded to a mental institution for breaking down Canadian settler society's inflexible order of "proper" behaviour (in the opinion of Chester Brown and his imagetext, at least), the Métis' hybridity leads them to be punished by the Anglo-Protestant colonial ascendancy of their time for breaking down the *flexible* (but still fixed) order of settler-cultural identity.

It is perhaps debatable as to whether or not Brown's *Louis Riel* simply repeats the unaltered discriminatory discourse of settler culture concerning the Métis or mimics it in an ironic critique of greater density. There are certainly elements of his approach to the Métis that exhibit the clever negotiation of issues of hybridity so prevalent in the rest of his work, but other elements echo his refusal to cede the hybrid ground to Canadian Native peoples in general: "they can't have both – it's one or the other." First and foremost among these is the noticeable lack of cultural detail in Brown's representation of the Métis. Language aside, there is little to identify them as specifically Métis; next to nothing in their dress, manner, or appearance that distinguishes them as culturally distinct from Anglo-Canadians. We are left with their language (French, or indicated as being French) and a brief tableau of celebration that is clearly aligned with tropes of French-

Canadian culture (45:6), and the occasional Métis drawn with Native-like features (61:5-6, 159:6). Again, one (French) or the other (Native), not both (Métis).

This lack of cultural detail could easily be glossed over, marked down to Brown's inability to embed such information in the body of his imagetext, but a comparative glance at the Francophone comics dealing with Riel demonstrates that it is very much possible to do so. Freynet's *Louis Riel en bande dessinée* features richer settings in terms of cultural detail; it is evident in the early pages (2-3, "peau de bison" on 4), but later Freynet gives the Métis a flattering introduction as "Métis francophones, Les Bois Brûlés, gens fiers, hardis et religieux" (21:3). There is likewise a depiction of a dance identified as specifically Métis (22:4) and two separate visual representations of the buffalo hunt, that most important of Métis social, economic, and cultural events (22:1, 43:3). Zoran and Toufik's *Louis Riel: Le père du Manitoba* is even more visually-detailed in this manner, and much more obvious in its role as a promotional tract for Métis nationalism. The preamble to the graphic text begins with "Nous, Métis," a statement of the Métis character as "une société homogène et bien distincte" (3); though "homogeneous" is a curious label to affix to a people defined by their hybridity, it makes a certain amount of sense when viewed as a nationalist affirmation of the concept of a unified Métis community.

"Nous, Métis" is accompanied by a detailed drawing of a "typical" Métis man, his attire festooned with cultural touchstones like the Assomption sash, feathered hat and mocassin boots (3), details that permeate the rest of the text. This is followed by an image/text representation of the buffalo hunt and of a specifically Métis dialect (the

authors call it a "langue"), "michif" (4-5). The representative authority in this preamble (clearly differentiated from the graphic text) is weighted heavily towards the text, the drawings offering little more than corroborative details, hence the pertinence of the term "image/text." In the graphic text itself, as in Freynet's work, Zoran and Toufik also depict a Métis cultural dance (8:1), though their art is rife with visual markers of primitive ritualism (firelight and shadows, sticks and noisemakers brandished, wild expressions on the dancers' faces). In general, however, both of these Francophone graphic texts include a much more distinct and detailed portrait of Métis than Brown has to offer. More vitally, however, they respect and represent the specified hybridity of Métis culture, while Brown is more invested in locating it in closer proximity to either side of the classic colonizer/colonized dichotomy.

This sort of tug-of-war for the soul of the Métis culture is interpreted in *Louis Riel* through the complex relationship between the titular biographical subject and his slightly-less-famous ally, Gabriel Dumont. "I became history. You became a footnote," Riel tells Dumont at one point in Lenny Everson's aforementioned short play on the two figures (13), but the reality is that their popular images are quite competitive. Albert Braz writes that "Dumont clearly poses the most formidable threat to Riel's reputation" (202), largely because of his skills as an "instinctive leader" and the gradually wider acceptance of Dumont, particularly amongst in the Métis community, as "the quintessential Métis hero" (201). But there is more to the symbolic "threat" Dumont represents to Riel's representational potency than simple comparative divergences in terms of leadership or heroism. Riel and Dumont are practical opposites; Dumont is especially strong in the

representative spheres in which Riel is vulnerable, and vice versa. Although neither man brokers any ambiguity in identifying themselves as Métis, each of their iconic personas tends to tilt more towards one binaristic pole than the other, making it difficult for either of them to unequivocally occupy the ideal hybridized position of the Métis. At least that is the relation between them established by Brown, who seems to construct Riel and Dumont as exemplars of the diametrically opposed positions of colonizer and colonized, imperial and indigene, gentleman and bushman, respectively.

Beginning with the first meeting of the two men in the bio-graphic narrative late in Part One, their differences are emphasized on multiple levels of the imagetext. Throughout the brief encounter, Dumont and Riel are placed facing each other, hugging the edges of the panels (78:6-79:6). Granted, this is a conventional comics composition, but it sets the two men off in clear opposition to one another nonetheless. The conservative, sophisticated Riel is dressed in a tailored overcoat and holds the right side of the panel, which, as the last place the reader's eye scans to when reading left-to-right, is the more sedentary and established part of the imagetext. The active and rustic Dumont ("a natural man par excellence, adapted perfectly to the life of the wilderness" [Woodcock 34]), on the other hand, wears an animal-skin vest and is placed on the left, the more dynamic space of the panel usually employed for entrances and exits.

The textual content of their exchange further establishes their divergent personas. Dumont, the rough man of action, speaks knowledgeably of the character of the terrain and offers to lead guerrilla-style attacks on the advancing colonial army of the Canadians (79:1). Presaging the disjunction between their philosophies in 1885, however, Riel

locates the authoritative evidence of the next course of action in the written word, namely a letter from Colonel Wolseley, commander of the Canadian expeditionary force. He is already reaching for this testimonial from the settler-colonial agent as Dumont makes his offer to lead an assault (79:1), and the letter itself is offered as a rebuttal (79:2). But Dumont, who is illiterate, cannot read it (79:3), and mistrusts its content when Riel reads it to him (79:5); such cultured discourse is thus not only unfamiliar to this "natural man," it is technically unintelligible. Riel, more invested in the discourses of colonial civilization, chooses to believe the written intention of other civilized men to "deal with us honourably" (79:5), naively so, as events would prove. With this, Dumont takes his leave, adding "I'd only be interested in sticking around if you were going to fight" (79:6).

It is only in Part Three, the section of *Louis Riel* dealing with the events leading up to and including the 1885 Northwest Rebellion, that these differing philosophies begin to skew toward the established colonialist binaries. After realizing that the Canadian surveyors had not been dividing the land to the satisfaction of the Métis, Dumont pays a visit to the Dominion Lands Office and argues for Métis land title in language that grounds the claim in a strong identification with indigeneity: "*Our* ancestors *owned* this land – the rules should be different for those of us with Indian blood" (123:5). Later, in rousing his fellow Métis to action, Dumont makes a similar appeal, calling the land that he believes the Canadian government is maneuvering to dispossess the Métis of "the soil where generations of our ancestors sleep" (126:2).

Never in the bio-graphic narrative do comparable statements emphasizing the indigeneity of the Métis come from Riel's mouth. A brief look at Riel's 1883 poetic ode

to the Métis, "Le peuple Métis-canadien-français," demonstrates that he tended to locate the best qualities of his beloved people in their French-Canadian heritage rather than in their First Nations descent. "L'Esprit français qui nous stimule / Est notre grand fortifiant," Riel writes (*Collected Writings, Vol. 4* 323), a succinct summation of the poem's rhetorical thrust; furthermore, the Métis' Native heritage is marginalized as providing them with little more than a "grande indifférence" (322) and "quelques belles locutions" borrowed from the "langues sauvages" (324). Though he expresses sympathy for the suffering of Native peoples in his address to the jury at his trial and stresses his efforts to help them (*Queen vs. Louis Riel* 147), Riel's split allegiances generally tended to skew toward the civilized, rooted settler-culture aspect of Métis identity.

The dichotomous cultural identifications preferred by Riel and Dumont underscore their re-introduction to each other in Part Three of *Louis Riel*: the two men shake hands, a visual call-back to the handshakes that began and ended their earlier meeting (78:6 and 79:6, respectively). In this reiteration, however, their contrasted appearances are even further polarized: Dumont, who has travelled far to see Riel, is filthy and disheveled, his travel attire wrinkled and flecked with dirt, while Riel, who has just stepped out of mass, is sharp and well-groomed in his Sunday best (127:1). The historical irony is that, when Dumont and his party arrived to meet Riel, they were surprised and "moved" by the deprived "conditions in which they found him living" (Woodcock 153); Brown is either unaware of this fact or glosses over it. Their comportment in these panels is tied to the circumstances of their meeting, but it likewise further encodes Riel and Dumont symbolically as figures of civilization and of the

wilderness, respectively.

Once the Rebellion commences, these identifications of both Riel and Dumont become crystallized in their actions. At the battle of Duck Lake, Riel plays the role of Old-World Christian holy warrior, exhorting Catholic saints to protect the Métis despite the practical objections of his men (159:4), while Dumont goes "wild," "taking reckless chances" as he rides through the woods (159:5-160:3). They play similar roles during the engagement at Fish Creek, though their separation becomes even more extreme: Riel remains in Batoche, standing with his arms in the shape of a cross (instead of merely holding it, he *becomes* the crucifix himself; 179:3-180:3), while Dumont leads the men in battle hidden amongst the trees in a ravine (their closeness to the natural landscape is inescapable, until they almost *become* the landscape; 175:3-176:2). And though they are back together during the final stand at Batoche, the schism remains: Riel refines his religious doctrine between battles (190:1-191:4) and spouts theology in the rifle pits (192:1-192:5) while Dumont fights on and speaks only in terse action-hero one-liners (192:5, 195:5-6).

But the encroaching polarization of these two figures is particularly apparent when, after entering a deserted enemy fort, they discuss their next course of action in the campaign. The sequence plays out as a mirror image of their initial meeting in Part One: both men are attired similarly and are placed in the same positions in the panel composition, with Riel on the right and Dumont on the left (164:5-166:5). Once again, Dumont lays out his plans for guerrilla warfare against the Canadian troops as Riel consults paperwork, but unlike their first meeting, when they stood face-to-face and

calmly discussed the options, Riel has his back turned to Dumont, now even more in the thrall of the written word, represented by a large pile of sheets rather than by a single letter as in Part One.

Most important, though, is the way in which Riel casually scuttles Dumont's plans to harass the enemy, invoking a negative indigenous stereotype as he tells him, "those are Indian tactics. God doesn't want us to use savagery" (165:4). Riel shows his true mind quite clearly here: the Catholic God, not precisely the God of the Protestant colonial order but certainly the God of imperial Europe, is opposed to "savagery" and to "Indian tactics." Riel, the Quebec-educated, essentially "civilized" gentleman, cannot abide the "natural man" Dumont's appeal to indigeneity. In addition, when Dumont falls to anger and argues vociferously in favour of guerrilla tactics, Riel replies by asking "Gabriel, do you have faith in God?" (166:5); Riel once again accentuates the French-Catholic side of Métis identity as trumping the Native side, a perspective which Dumont again finds unintelligible (167:1).

If this sequence is a mirror of their meeting in Part One, then the last meeting of these two diametrically opposed representatives of Métis identity is an ironic reversal of both the exchanges discussed above. At the end of Part Three, Riel and Dumont meet in the woods outside Batoche after the defeat of the Métis forces (196:1-199:6). The forest is drawn as a dense tangle of tree trunks, a natural setting in which Dumont seems much more comfortable than the perspiring, nervous Riel (196:1-197:5). Brown uses more panels than are strictly necessary to depict this last meeting of the two allies, allowing his narrative to slow down and catch its breath after the hectic battles that consumed the

previous pages.

Brown also experiments with an interesting visual effect in this sequence: on two occasions (196:3-4, 197:3-4), panels are arranged side by side to achieve the effect of a continuous panoramic image, although the gutter remains firmly placed between them. This visual trick is most striking in its second usage, where Riel, now placed on the more transitory left side of the panel, appears to glimpse Dumont emerging from the right edge of the frame (197:4). This arrangement, a direct transposition of their previous exchanges, is then sustained throughout the conversation between the two men. Therefore, they appear to be speaking to each other across the same stretched panel when in fact they are pointedly separated by the gutter. This is a final, artful reflection, built into the formal implications of the imagetext, of the "either-or" end-game that Brown sees as being inevitable for the Métis and for all Native peoples in a modern settler society. Neither binary is a desirable option: the Métis subject must either go with Riel to settler civilization and to (at least symbolic) condemnation and death, or with Dumont to exile from the land that is the basis of their identity and to a staged performance of indigeneity (Dumont's post-Rebellion time as a performer for Buffalo Bill's Wild West show; 241:2). Still, Brown places the gutter between them, that hybrid space of limitless representative possibility, that crack through which history may slip. Whether purposely or not, Brown leaves open the possibility of Métis hybridity between the two poles represented by Dumont and Riel, but its closure is left finally in the dominion of the reader.

Again, this point may well be debatable; Brown's depiction of Riel, as we have

seen, is far more complex than this specific analysis gives credit (as we saw in the last chapter), and there are likely more simple dramatic reasons for the portrayal of Dumont as an action-hero frontiersman in the comic (to say nothing of the historical accuracy of such a portrayal). Ultimately, it is not entirely fair to pronounce definitely that Brown is simply recirculating the discriminatory effects of settler-colonial discourse, at least not on the evidence of his representation of the Métis alone. Perhaps a more efficacious demonstration of Brown's application of this sort of colonial discourse can be seen, however, in his fascinating negotiation of the language gap between Francophone and Anglophone characters.

Bracketed Language and Linguistic Non-Recognition

The text of the Francophone Riel comics that have been discussed above is written entirely in undifferentiated French with only a few brief, inconsistently-implemented English phrases. In a stark contrast to this, Brown's bio-graphic narrative is written entirely in English, but with a vital refinement: he uses brackets in his word- and thought-balloons to "signify that the person indicated is speaking [or thinking] in French" (9:1). On a basic narrative level, this practice allows Brown to communicate the content of his Francophone characters' expressions to his (predominantly Anglophone) audience while still respecting the linguistic alterity of the French-speakers, to a certain extent. But at the same time it serves to reaffirm the colonial hierarchy of Canadian settler culture, in particular the hegemony of the English language preconditioned by the super-

imposition of British imperial culture on the settler-culture that it spawned (or that it conquered from those who did spawn it, namely the imperial French).

All textual communication in *Louis Riel* is therefore conducted in the imperial *lingua franca*, which (despite the etymology of the term) is not French but English in this case. The brackets operate more as visual devices than as textual ones, becoming image-textual tags for colonial *différance*; the non-*lingua francas* are "indicated" by these icons, and indeed are separated from the English "mother tongue" by them. There are in fact degrees of separation from the *lingua franca* built into the imagetext, as is evinced by the extremely brief appearance of Cree chiefs Big Bear and Poundmaker, who led a Native revolt against the Canadian government around the same time as the Métis rebelled in 1885.[2] The Native leaders tell Riel about the plight of their people in Cree, but their words are surrounded by *double*-brackets (131:1-3), visually classifying the Cree and their language as apart from not only the colonial tongue (English) but also the sub-colonial tongue (French). This is superficially an issue of translation, but it is more than that; the brackets succinctly signify the discursive hierarchy of settler culture, from the imperial (English) to the external, competitive imperial (French) to the internal,

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[2]There is a great deal more that could be written about Brown's approach to "full-blood" Natives in *Louis Riel*, but I feel I neither have the space in this essay nor the requisite knowledge and expertise in the current discourses of Native critical studies to tackle the subject in an appropriate way. Taken in concert with Brown's public statements concerning the "Native problem" (a troubling term, even within quotation marks), the manner in which he reduces not only the events of the Native revolt but the general role of Native peoples in both Métis resistances to, literally, footnotes (247, 248, 256, 257, 262) might be worthy of further critical examination. I realize that I am guilty of the same reductive practice at the moment, and perhaps both Brown and myself can be defended on the grounds that our mutual focus is aimed more at Riel and the Métis, but I

indigenous other (Cree), and they do so rather directly with little to suggest any measure of authorial awareness of their problematic colonial significations. Most importantly, however, this method serves to locate Brown's discursive position firmly and indisputably within the orbit of the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture.

But Brown's use of language does not always skew towards the colonial hegemony; like most elements of *Louis Riel* and his earlier works, it refuses to conform to simple categorization. There are several moments in the graphic text that constitute linguistic misrecognition, or more accurately a simple inability to bridge the language gap between English and French. What is striking about these moments, and why I have chosen to build up to them at the conclusion of this chapter, is how important each of these instances is to the overall scope of the bio-graphic narrative. For example, each of the discordant encounters based around government surveys that sparked the Métis resistances are marked by such moments of linguistic disjunction: in 1869, the surveyors ignore a Métis' shouted demands to get off his friend's land because he does not speak English (10:1-3); here, at the initial incident of the coming crisis, is a fundamental lack of discursive understanding.

In the build-up to the Northwest Rebellion in Part Three, the language difference is also a factor, as Dumont visits the Dominion Land Office to express his objections to the discrepancies in the land-lot system through a translator (123:1-4). As the meeting produces no rapprochement from either side on the issue, Dumont leaves on a note of incomprehension, responding to the Anglophone land agent's confused "What's he

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maintain that the gloss does deserve more attention than I am able to give to it.

saying?" by asking (perhaps rhetorically), "why doesn't the government send us officials who can speak French?" (124:1). Both of the conflicts which form the backbone of the bio-graphic narrative are thus predicated on the inability of the French and English segments of Canadian settler society to understand each other's perspectives, a point amplified through Brown's streamlining of the cultural discrepancies through what he himself dubs "an exageration (sic) of the linguistic divide" (246).

For perhaps the defining instance of this amplification of "the linguistic divide" in *Louis Riel*, however, we must turn back to the execution of that caricatured symbol of British imperialism, Thomas Scott. We have already seen how Brown negotiates the representation of Scott, but the creative disjunction of language in this moment wrests added resonance out of an already portentous episode. After the court-martial tribunal sentences Scott to death by firing squad (68:4-69:2, in bracket-indicated "French"), there is a panel in which Scott stands silently, flanked by Riel and another Métis, in what the reader can only assume is stoic acceptance of his fate (69:3). But in a clever, biting moment, Scott turns to Riel in the next panel, professing incomprehension of his sentence by asking "you know I don't speak any French – what did they just say?" (69:4).

It is generally agreed that no event had such far-reaching, negative consequences for both Riel and the Métis than the execution of Scott, "a mistake, which cost [them] heavily" (Bumstead, *Thomas Scott's Body* 197). But at the very centre of the event, Brown enshrines a charged instance of linguistic incomprehension, a vital failure to communicate. Furthermore, there is no proffered solution to this failure, as Brown "cuts away," to employ film terminology, to the day of the execution (69:5) before Riel can

translate for Scott. This constitutes a curious proscription of Riel's perceived role as a mediator between the dominant language groups of the text, telegraphed from his entrance into the bio-graphic narrative in which he is valued for his bilingualism (10:6), and it leads into the execution sequence itself.

In the course of the sequence, Brown suspends his difference-establishing brackets around French speech, and both French phrases spoken remain untouched in the graphic text (71:2, 72:2), though Brown provides English translations in the footnotes (250). Taken as one with the incomprehension in the tribunal scene that anticipates it, the choice is marked by ambiguity: is Brown respectfully (albeit briefly) re-establishing the cultural distinctness of these separate tongues or else deploring the broken lines of communication and split allegiances that mark the relations between French and English Canada, phenomenons both historically exacerbated by and symbolically embodied in the complex saga of Scott, Riel, and the Métis resistances?

Ultimately, it is perhaps most helpful to view both this sequence and *Louis Riel* as a whole through the theoretical prism of what Bhabha calls the "productive tension of the perplexity of language" (243). Faced with the complex, often un-categorizable representations, politics, concepts, and position-takings undertaken by Brown in the course of this bio-graphic narrative of Riel, the common thread in each case seems to be the "productive tension" that results from the collisions, the repulsions and the negotiations of such disparate elements under the aesthetic "big tent" of a single graphic text. This is a subtle deviation from Bhabha's theoretical parameters for hybridity, which he states is "not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures" (162);

resolving said tension does not seem to be the undertaking as much as wringing productive friction *from* that tension, however, a disambiguation that should be allowable.

At any rate, in the forthcoming conclusion, I shall reassemble the binary-collapsing conceptions that were outlined in the introduction – image-text, comics and bio-graphic narrative, settler-invader post-coloniality, and hybridity – and succinctly summarize the manner in which they come together and pull apart again in the course of Brown's "comic-strip biography" of Riel. In doing so, I hope to show that it is in the complexities, the contradictions and the perplexity of these hybrid forms – in their very unsettling nature – that this "productive tension" can be ultimately located, and that the productivity of *Louis Riel* as an imagetext is predicated on the fundamental revaluation of binaristic assumptions concerning the myriad, interlocking themes contained in the text. In the final pages, then, a compact (re)consideration of the manner in which these themes – this *history* – slips through the cracks of Brown's complex imagetext shall be undertaken.

Conclusion: History in the Gutters

In the introduction, I quoted Homi Bhabha as writing, "hybridity has no such perspective of depth or truth to provide: it is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures [...] in a dialectical play of 'recognition'" (162). I also cited W.J.T. Mitchell's statement that "the image/text is neither a method nor a guarantee of historical discovery; it is more like an aperture or cleavage in representation, a place where history might slip through the cracks" (104). Both of these articulations seem to me to posit a similar delineation of the central function of those vital, flexible terms of image/text and hybridity which have cropped up repeatedly in this study, terms which indeed are, as much as Chester Brown's *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, the subjects of this study. Just as hybridity provides no depth, truth or resolution in its revaluation of the binaristic assumptions of colonial power, the problem of image/text does not guarantee significant aesthetic discoveries that reconfigure or overturn the binaristic assumptions of history. They provide no comforting answers, only more sharp questions. No recognition, only tension. No resistance, only negotiation.

In this way, both the colonial hybrid and the "aperture" between image and text dissolve the fetishized structuralist desire for certainties in representation into a disconnected realm of tense relationality, frustrating not only the established binaries but also the nebulous, wished-for "third term" that resolves their prevailing conflicts. They highlight the cognitive reality that, despite the often politically-charged postcolonial rhetoric to the contrary, "literary resistance is necessarily in a place of ambivalence: between systems, between discursive worlds, implicit and complicit in both of them" (Slemon 37). Indeed, resistance as such is (ideally) displaced by

negotiation, or else is transformed into it; resistance *becomes* negotiation, and negotiation is itself a form of resistance.

This formulation is absolutely key to grasping the Second-World position in the postcolonial rubric, as Stephen Slemon has argued. The literary discourse of Second-World settler cultures such as Canada inhabits "a space of dynamic relation between [...] those binaries that colonialism 'settles' upon a landscape" (38), and the inherently ambivalent position occupied by the settler subject in such societies (as delineated in the introduction with reference to Johnston and Lawson) is not a hindrance but rather an opportunity. Indeed, as Slemon puts it, "this ambivalence of emplacement is the *condition* of their possibility" (39). This idea of ambivalence as a realm of possibility, of negotiation as a form of resistance to binaristic power, is borne out by the historical narrative this study has focused on: the 1869/70 resistance by Louis Riel and the Métis did not constitute a firm revolt but rather took the form of a prelude to negotiations, to which the maneuverings of the so-called "resistance" were clearly subordinate.

As I initially argued in the introduction and supported with textual analysis in the succeeding chapters, comics in general and bio-graphic texts in particular are uniquely suited to negotiating the space of ambivalent possibility that proceeds from hybridity, mostly due to their own hybrid formalistic grounding in the productive tension between image and text and the representational possibilities that tension predicates. Brown, a master of unsettling aesthetic and representational assumptions throughout his comics career, is likewise well-suited to the task of negotiating an unsettling subject like Riel, who, as a classic hybrid figure, offers no resolution, no dialectical play of recognition to soothe and reaffirm the myriad binaries that interpellate him through the ages and pages of Canadian history. To read (and to analyze) *Louis Riel* is to strain

one's eyes (and one's critical faculties) in an attempt to discern the endless hybrids, cleavages, ambivalences, and dynamic relations simultaneously interweaving with one another, retreating from one another, and stacked on top of one another in the text. I will not deny that the task is an arduous one, the multiplicitous hybrids quite nearly overwhelming in both their scope and their opacity. How do we approach this thoroughly hybridized text in a quantitative manner? How is it that the symbolic and historical implications of the constant productive tension apportioned by these hybrid spaces can be distinguished and summarized without, at best, doing their complexity profound disservice or, at worst, distorting and misrepresenting them altogether?

I believe a metaphor, one that is anchored in the theoretical language and formalistic definitions upon which this entire project is built, may well serve the purpose in this case. For this I return first to Mitchell's expressive phrase concerning the image/text gap: "a place where history might slip through the cracks." What I take this phrase to mean (and it has more than a little hybridized ambiguity to it, to be sure) is that in the space of productive tension and infinite relation between image and text, history is always already active in "the interplay of visual and verbal experience" (Mitchell 104). Though this hybrid space, as Bhabha warns us, brokers no resolutions to the antagonistic anxieties of its poles, history may still slip through its cracks, as does dirty water through a strainer. Though these fragmented streams of history are unlikely to be pure, revelatory discoveries that entirely reverse established assumptions (in fact, our knowledge of hybridity tells us they *cannot* be), they will almost certainly contain secondary particles of the grand themes and ideas based on those assumptions which were shaken loose by the productive tension of the hybrid space.

The metaphor I wish to close with, then, places these fragmented streams of

history, flowing as effluents through the cracks and seams between words and pictures, through those ambiguous hybrid spaces, back into the throughways of the bio-graphic narrative. In the context of *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, and of comics in general, it should be obvious what the formal equivalent of these cracks are: they are the cracks in the page, the spaces between panels where the imaginative possibilities abound, what Scott McCloud calls "the gutters." In *Louis Riel*, history and narrative are in constant negotiation, the hybridity resulting from their tension located in the gutters; the acts of closure perpetrated in these spaces in concert between the artist and the reader perhaps do not *close* anything at all, but rather *open* new plateaus of representation. In this bio-graphic narrative, the gutters are the cracks through which history might slip, where it slides out of its firm, binaristic definitions and becomes something more hypothetical, more uncertain, more *possible*. The missing panel at the end of the narrative mentioned late in the first chapter gains even more resonance with this metaphor in mind: it becomes a sort of endless, unclosed gutter where the figure of Louis Riel is always *being* interpreted but never *is* interpreted. This is the achievement of Brown's text, and of the bio-graphic narrative form: it allows history to slip through its cracks, examining and representing it as it goes. In *Louis Riel*, history is in the gutters.

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